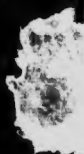
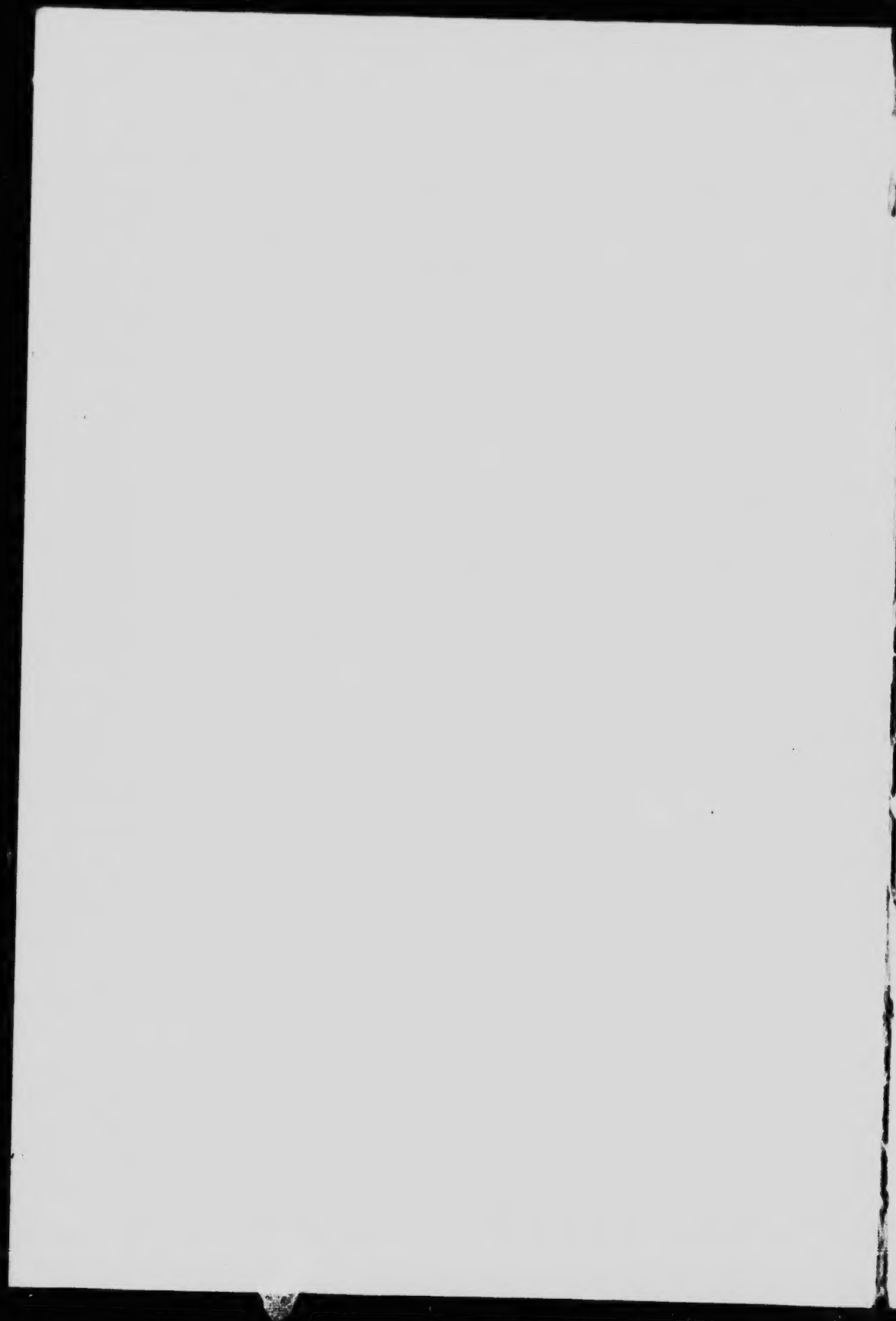


JUNGLE TERROR

HARVEY WICKHAM

35





JUNGLE TERROR



"You make a fool of me again . . . I will teach you!"

JUNGLE TERROR

BY
HARVEY WICKHAM

FRONTISPIECE
BY
RALPH PALLEN COLEMAN

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JUNGLE TERROR



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CHAPTER I

THE CABLEGRAM

AND God said unto the serpent: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed. It shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise its heel."

Also, we know from less holy writ that a snake, though scotched, continues to be venomous and wags its tail until the very sundown of its day.

Alone, at a table in the best café in a shabby little South American capital which must here be nameless, sat a sun-browned Yankee lost in the contemplation of the

smoke of his cigarette. He was thin, lank, with introspective, pale, blue eyes—one of those men whose strength both of mind and of body is hidden from the careless observer; men who look indolent, impractical, and yet are to be found, somehow, always where the world's work is toughest and its dangers most subtle and deadly.

A suit of well-worn khaki suggested at first some sort of military service, but the absence of braid, to say nothing of the comfortable slouch of his shoulders, showed him to be civilian. He had, with it all, an air of being at one and the same time lost and perfectly and unutterably at home.

Ross Purdy would, in fact, have felt at home anywhere. And yet for the moment he did wonder why he happened to be in that particular spot. There was absolutely nothing to do. The war was over; German intrigue in the far quarters of the earth a thing of an unbelievable past. Why, then,

did not the Government let him return to Washington; or, say, to Washington Square? Truly, orders were strange things, past finding out. There must be a reason behind them. But it was nonsense not to trust a man.

"A cable for you, señor," said a waiter, laying a yellow envelope on the table.

Purdy nodded, but did not take his hands from his pockets. So here was something definite at last. But, since it had been so long in reaching him, there was no hurry about it. He, too, could take his time. Pride has its demands, after all.

The theatre-like room was drowsy under the spell of the late afternoon. Overhead a number of creaking rotary fans, with long wooden arms as crazy as Don Quixote's windmills, drove down the hot breath of the Tropic of Capricorn, but fell just short of creating a breeze. In an hour the city would begin to wake from its siesta, and fill the café with gaiety carefully imitated from

gaiety of New York, London, and more especially Paris. But as yet, the whole world seemed half asleep.

Now and then some fellow idler, willing to scrape up an acquaintance, would pass near Purdy's table. One, a stout, boyish individual, with an air of counterfeit recklessness that strove in vain with a homesickness that was all too real, passed several times but did not succeed in catching his eye. From the doorway a party of tourists had Purdy pointed out to them as a one-time revolutionist, and swallowed the story without a gulp.

And all the while that unopened cablegram lay there eyeing its recipient reproachfully from the table.

He endured it as long as he could. But a cablegram is a cablegram. The moment he permitted himself to look at it, his fingers reached instinctively forward and tore it open. Expanded from code to English, it read:

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Without attracting attention make thorough investigation of the native panic in the *montanas* near Los Altos. Stories here contradictory. Draw at sight for whatever amounts necessary.

The reader of this *carte blanche* order stared as if he could not believe his eyes. Why should the august Service to which he belonged be bothering itself about such things as natives in a pan' or out?

Again the boyish individual with the reckless pose drifted into view. He was the local representative of an international news agency, and having found nobody willing to quench his thirst or to give him a story, was on his way out. This time Purdy invited him to a chair.

"Tommy," he began, "what's this fuss I hear they're having in the uplands? Another rebellion, I suppose. Know anything about it?"

Tommy ran his fingers through a mop of sweat-dampened hair, settled himself de-

liberately, leaned forward on his elbows, and answered:

"So, that's what you're down here for! But what's the use of calling it a rebellion—to me? And if I were you I wouldn't talk so loud."

He looked hurt. Purdy was forced to smile.

"If it isn't a rebellion, what is it?"

"Blessed if I know—if *you* don't," was the answer. "And you're right. If I were you I'd trust nobody—nobody at all. The gang down here has got a finger in the pie. And you know what *they* can do to you."

"Come, Tommy! I'm really in the dark. I've been on war duty. What on earth can be interesting the gang down here, . . . you call them, and the gang up along the little old Potomac, too? The days when any street fight might be part of an international plot are over, Son. We've laid the Big Plotter by the heels. What new deviltry are we up against now?"

"That I don't know. Beyond *my* job. But it doesn't take much to make South America unhealthy—and there is *something* stirring. Right the opposite of a rebellion, though. The natives are *afraid*."

Tommy, though somewhat mollified, was still obviously piqued at what he took to be a lack of frankness in his *vis-à-vis*, and Purdy was not sorry when, there being no prospects of further liquids making their appearance, he finally took his leave.

There remained the newspapers. Purdy sent out for a comprehensive assortment, and began digging for information. Little was to be had, though one of the miserable local journals written in Spanish told how a foreigner, with the suggestive name of Krieg and living well off toward the suspected region, had committed suicide after the walls of his *hacienda* had just missed killing him by falling flat, like the walls of Jericho. The cause of this mysterious be-

haviour on the part of the walls was not mentioned, nor did there appear to be any evidence of suicide beyond the fact of the fellow's disappearance. Purdy wondered why such an incomplete item should have been published at all.

It was on a par with the yarn printed immediately beneath it, about a party of hunters along the Marañon River having caught sight of a new species of black jaguar while wandering beyond the usual trails in a dense *selva*, or primeval jungle—a species of such “unusual size and ferocity” that they had been “unable to kill it with the ammunition at hand.” The Marañon is a tributary of the Amazon, far north of Los Altos, and the yarn was well within the scope of the ordinary nature-faker's imagination. Yet to this incident, too, one was moved to apply the epithet “odd.”

The American papers offered nothing until he came upon an obscure dispatch, buried at the bottom of a column among

the advertisements and likely enough from Tommy's own hand. It was to the effect that, for some cause yet to be ascertained but presumably connected with an outbreak of sheep-plague, the remote hill districts in the neighbourhood of—yes, it was Los Altos, again!—were rapidly being depopulated by an exodus which had no parallel in South American history. Investors in mining stocks, the persons most affected, were warned to pay no attention to tales coming from refugees, for the reason that most of the latter appeared to have gone insane from the hardships of their journey.

A very curious item, this. Hardships of their journey, indeed! Tommy's confidence would have to be won and an explanation dragged out of him, that was certain. But why should Uncle Sam, with the work of helping to remake a world-map on his hands, be worrying about it?

Purdy got to his feet, his tall, slender figure with its slight stoop giving more than

ever the impression of delicacy rather than strength. But his nerves were humming now like taut steel cords. All sense of lassitude, all his former feeling of ill usage, of being left neglected and forgotten in that far quarter of the earth, had vanished utterly. Hardships of the journey, eh? Something which had upset their reason? A likely story, that!

Outside the café the streets were practically deserted—vistas of intolerable brightness, cut here and there by sharp, swordlike shadows fighting valiantly on behalf of the cool and languorous evening which was to come. From the distance rolled an open carriage and pair, setting up a clatter of hoofs and a stir of dust. He looked, expecting to see some high-bred, haughty Spanish dame, scornful of modernity and automobiles, and protected by the inevitable maid and parasol—the forerunner of hundreds yet waiting for the five o'clock sea breeze. Instead, the carriage proved to be

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empty. It halted. From the box jumped a uniformed flunkey, who bowed respectfully and said, "The Presidente sends his compliments, señor, and would like to see you at the palace."

CHAPTER II

OBSTACLES

PURDY refused a seat in the carriage. This summons, coming so closely on the heels of the cablegram, struck him as curious. Of course there could be no connection between the two, but it might be a good thing to walk and collect his ideas before plunging into an interview, let its end and object be what it might. Thus it was that he found himself crossing the palace grounds leisurely and on foot.

The Presidente's two children, in the charge of a darkly beautiful young woman in white cap and apron, were playing on the lawn beneath the shadow of one of the ornate porticos. For all he knew, this was their daily habit. Excepting one formal call, business had never brought him that

way before. But his mind was in a mood to take note of trifles, and it seemed rather odd that the domestic life of such an ostentatious establishment as Fernando Lara's should be allowed to escape from the privacy of the *patio*. If the scene had been planned purposely to catch his eye it could not have been staged better.

The maid was addressing her charges in French as he came past. This was natural enough. It was like the Presidente to put on airs by employing a foreign servant. Yet it was not the Champs Élysées or Luxembourg Gardens which Purdy suddenly found himself thinking about. No, it was of something more sinister: the picture of one of those lost and crooked streets on the lower East Side of New York where all nationalities congregate and weird things come to pass. A whim of association, no doubt—a vague memory from a forgotten case of his newspaper days.

To whim, also, could be attributed the

idea that those steady, heavy-lidded eyes regarded him with a look of serious purpose. A nurse maid might have been expected either to smile or to ignore him altogether. This look was half threat, half warning. But what nonsense he was thinking! Grant that she did come from Chatham Square rather than from Paris. Grant that her complexion, in such vivid contrast with her hair and eyes, was far too fair to be French. She was not the first who had played such a deception upon a gullible employer. Purdy mounted the imitation marble steps before the grandiose entrance with a sense of disgust. Everything in South America was imitation—everything.

Lara received him with elaborate cordiality. Purdy wondered whether the false note here was struck by the drifts of gray above the temples, accentuating the condescending benevolence of a high-born *caballero*, or by the prominent cheek bones and more than Castillian swarthiness of

skin which gave the Presidente on close inspection the aspect of a Sioux Indian, tamed but not altogether trustworthy.

The conversation began inanely with talk about the climate and the price of sugar, and led up gradually to the subject of bright young men left knocking about the world with nothing in the shape of a real opportunity to show their remarkable qualities. Purdy could hardly believe his ears when he heard himself actually asked to resign his present position and accept a post in Lara's official household. They needed him, it appeared, though the only duty mentioned was that of drawing regularly a salary whose figures were astounding. But what impressed the American most was the fact that Lara knew the contents of the cablegram. The code had been stolen. And the proposed salary was a bribe to keep him idling inoffensively about the city. Such absurd liberality could not otherwise be accounted for.

Purdy was used to surprises. Not a muscle of his face moved. But his mind was active. Serious matters were assuredly afoot. And since his coming on to visit the hills was no longer a secret, why not mention it openly and see what would happen?

Lara received the information without a blink.

"Ordered to investigate the trouble at Los Altos, are you? I was afraid of something of the kind. In fact, that was one of the reasons why I wanted to keep you with us. A man of your calibre—it is too bad to see you thrown away on such a trifling affair."

"Not thrown away. I'll be back, probably in a couple of weeks."

Purdy's Spanish was almost as soft and resonant as the other's. But the tone which answered him grew suddenly earnest.

"Don't be too certain, señor. These native troubles are, as you say in your

country, nasty things to mix up in. And—pray do not misunderstand me—exceedingly dangerous.”

“Just what is it—that is going on up in the mountains?” asked Purdy.

“Ah! that is more than I can say. Some tribe has found a war-chief, perhaps, and relapsed into primitive barbarism. Who can tell? All we are certain of is that not only the Blacks and the Indians, but the Mestizos and even the Whites, are rushing for the *pampas*. If I were you that is all I would want to know.”

It would have been impossible to combine menace and a friendly admonition into a more polite phrase. Purdy thanked the Presidente, and, without committing himself to any definite line of action, rose to withdraw. Lara accompanied him to the door, handed him over to a pompous major domo resplendent in medals and gold braid, and contented himself with a parting injunction.

"Better consider my offer, señor—better consider it carefully."

Purdy found himself at the beginning of a long corridor. It was not the way by which he had come in, and was so dimly lighted as to be almost dark. Instinctively he hesitated, and during that instant a woman appeared. Probably she had been there before him, only becoming visible as his eyes accustomed themselves to the shadows, but he was nearly as much astonished as if she had materialized out of the air. Though no children accompanied her now, it was impossible to mistake her. She was Lara's French maid. And she had stationed herself directly in his path.

Such impertinence was unbelievable. And even more remarkable was the behaviour of the major domo. Instead of reprimanding the under-servant, or at least standing politely at attention until the guest was ready to move, he stalked away majestically

by himself and disappeared around a corner. Purdy and the woman were left alone.

He eyed her angrily. But—she was a remarkably beautiful woman. One could not read the expression of her eyes in that obscurity, yet it seemed friendly—though veiled, perhaps, behind some indeterminate purpose. Purdy was about to demand an explanation when he decided, on second thought, that it would be better to let her begin the conversation.

"Ziss way, please, m'sieu," she lisped. "Ze man he make one little mistake. Ze way out, it is *par ici*—here."

She opened a door and stood aside, smiling, to let him pass.

Purdy paused. But he had already more than half suspected that the man had made a mistake, under the impression, perhaps, that the visitor was to be conducted to the domestic quarters. And the door which the girl held open led directly toward the entrance-way, as he remembered it. What

held him was the almost unmistakable evidence of collusion between her and the major domo. Also her broken English had failed to deceive. She was no more French than he was.

"Perhaps m'sieu is afraid," said a mocking voice.

Purdy coloured. He knew quite well now that he ought to be upon his guard. Her pretence of wanting merely to let him out was too thin. There was something behind it. But her laugh nettled him. He lost all sense of prudence. Besides, there was that look in her face, still suggesting a desire to help him. He stepped toward her.

Instead of waiting for him to pass, she retreated, keeping before him yet never turning away her eyes.

"There is something you wanted to tell me, is there not?" he began, crossing the threshold. "Come! Out with it—and talk United States."

"Oui, m'sieu — somezing. Ze Presidente——"

She paused, like one interrupted at the point of making a confidence. Purdy, catching the sound of a cautious step behind him, wheeled just in time to see the door swing to. He flung himself upon it, but it was locked. His retreat was cut off.

Furiously he turned to the girl, but she avoided his clutches, slipped through another door beyond, and slammed it in his face. He seemed to catch the echo of the words, "Pardon! m'sieu will do quite well where he is for a while," uttered in a tone between a cry and a laugh.

He was alone in a spacious, unfurnished chamber, which seemed once to have been used as a guard-room, for there were empty gun-racks along the walls. Now it was given over to dust, cobwebs, and garden tools. A few spades, a few pieces of rubber hose, an aggressively new American lawn mower and a rustic bench—these were its

sole furnishings. The floor and walls were of concrete; the doors solid and without openings. The windows had been bricked up all save one, which showed a small opening near the top for the entrance of light and air. Outside of a regular penitentiary, a more impregnable prison cell could hardly have been found.

Purdy's first impulse was to raise an outcry, but he checked it instantly. If the Presidente had dared to order this outrage upon an American citizen, an outcry would be useless. And who but the Presidente could have ordered it? And what power or semblance of a power had given him the courage? These *braggadocio* South American officials had sometimes very bizarre notions of their own importance and of the relative importance of the various nations of the earth. But there always had to be something or somebody to egg them on. What private ambition, what political plot could he, Purdy, be thwarting, now that Germany

was gone? It was impossible even to guess. The Secret Service is a secret service. Its servants work for the most part in the dark, unaware even of their own risks.

And the girl? At thought of her Purdy's self-control departed suddenly, and he began to pace the room like a caged animal. To think that he had been duped by such an ancient trick as this! Baited by a smile and a pair of inscrutable eyes! How should he ever confess to his superiors that he had lost his liberty while trying to follow a nursery maid? It would look like a vulgar flirtation, and ruin his reputation for having a head on his shoulders.

Nevertheless, it was not a flirtation. Whatever else, it was not that. Nothing had been farther from his mind than making love to the girl. She had piqued his curiosity, and with that covert air of Americanism about her and her apparent desire to tell him something for his own good, she had—pshaw! She had found his blind

side, that was all. Accounting for it would do no good. He was trapped.

But was he? That open space at the top of the window invited investigation. It was too high to reach directly from the floor, but by standing the rustic bench on end and using it as a ladder he managed to get a glimpse outside. What he saw was a group of trees and a great expanse of lavishly watered lawn—an unfamiliar bit of the palace grounds. But there was no crawling through the hole, it being protected by an ornamental grating. One could only wait and see what happened. Somebody must come by and by. It was not likely that they would leave him there to starve. If only he had a little water. He was thirsty already.

Purdy descended, lowered the bench to a horizontal position, and flung himself upon it, thankful even for such a couch. He did not believe that his predicament was serious, yet it began to dawn upon him that he

was contending against forces at once so intangible and unknown that it might at any moment become very serious indeed. A parched throat is a terrible reminder of the slenderness of the thread of human life.

CHAPTER III

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

HOURS passed. It grew dark. Purdy recovered his *sang froid* like an old campaigner whose nerves grow steadier as the battle progresses. Only it was a battle where for a time the initiative appeared to lie with the enemy. So, extended upon the bench, his hands locked behind his head for a pillow, he waited.

He must have slept for several hours before he was aroused by the sound of a rat gnawing cautiously overhead. A rat—yes, if a rat had a file for a tooth and could gnaw iron. Nothing could now be seen in that pitch-black chamber, not even the square of the window. But the metallic quality of the sound was unmistakable.

Purdy's mind at once reverted to the

ornamental grating which had thwarted his earlier attempt to escape. It was odd that no light came through it. Even starlight ought to be visible. Was there a shutter? He lay watching, and grew conscious finally of a dull blur that came and went. The window was not covered by a shutter but by something which moved.

Once more the bench did duty as a ladder. Purdy climbed as quietly as possible, but the gnawing ceased.

"Is that you?" whispered someone without.

"Tommy!"

"Yes; keep quiet just a minute now. I'll be through here in a jiffy."

Half an hour later the two were safely beyond the grounds.

"Now, Tommy, tell me—how did you come to look for me in there?"

"Got a note. It said where I'd find you. Also where I'd find a ladder and a file. Devil of a country, this."

"Who wrote the note?"

"Found it under my door. No name given. And I didn't ask questions of anybody—always healthier not to."

"But you undertook the job of getting me out. That wasn't very healthy on the face of it, it seems to me."

"Didn't think I'd leave another white man in the lurch, did you?"

Purdy paused—they were under a street lamp—and read in the other's eyes the loving admiration of a dog for its master. It surprised him as much as anything which had happened during all those past few eventful hours. He was not in the habit of regarding himself as anything remarkable. And yet to this forlorn wreck of a journalist, stranded in a semi-tropical back-water and dying of fatty degeneration of soul and body, he was an object of envy, almost of worship. Heretofore, circumstances had hidden it, but now it was plain. The idea made him want to laugh.

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"Tommy," he said, abruptly, "why don't you pull yourself together and get out of this?"

"Why doesn't the President of the United States make me Secretary of the Navy?"

"Anyway, it appears that I have unknown friends as well as enemies."

"Who? The party who wrote that note? Wait and see. Maybe you were a lot better off where I found you than you will be where you're going. Los Altos, isn't it?"

"Yes, Tommy. But if what you say is true I'd like first to discover your 'party'."

"No chance. It was printed in capital letters with a lead pencil, in just such English as a Spaniard—or a very clever person pretending to be a Spaniard—would write."

"Well, then, drop the note—though I am not going to drop the locking up until I've had a little Yankee set-to with Lara. He has quite a bit to explain. In the meantime—come! Get ready to go with me

into the mountains. I must have *somebody* I can trust."

Tommy stopped short in his tracks.

"You mean that?" he asked, earnestly. "Don't you know—what's the matter with me?"

"Certainly. Booze. But you won't be able to get it in the mountains."

"See you in the morning, then—at the café."

The words strove to be casual, but they came unsteadily; and with a quick clasp of the hand Tommy was gone.

Purdy's intention to rake the Presidente over the coals for an affront (to call it nothing worse) offered to the person of an American citizen was forestalled by an elaborately rhetorical epistle from Lara himself. He had heard of the "unfortunate incident," due, he said, to the "stupidity of menials," who had mistaken the honourable *caballero* for another person, "a political

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE 33

offender of no consequence," over whom, and over whom alone, "the local government presumed to have jurisdiction."

From that time on the preparations for the journey progressed without further interruption. Lara sent to offer a complete outfit, "in case the *caballero*"—it was always *caballero* now—"could not be dissuaded." And though this doubtful assistance was respectfully declined, it continued to be easy to find everything which a traveller could desire—especially guides.

"Too easy," as Tommy remarked. "It's like falling into a hole."

Purdy fully agreed with this view of things. He had not forgotten Lara's anxiety to add his name to his pay-roll. The bribe, the brusque imprisonment which followed its refusal, the note to Tommy, the apology, they were all parts of the same mystery. The very absurdity of the incidents, their comic-opera quality, only served the more to stir his sense of caution. No

guide who came recommended by any person, no matter who, was employed. Even then it was only three days before everything was ready. Having failed to hold him, they were speeding his departure. Who? Why? Unanswerable enigmas.

And now began the first assault on the mountains, beginning with a long but easy stage on board that wonder among climbers, the Los Altos Railroad—a unique piece of engineering which never reaches the destination for which it is named, but makes its terminal half way, as if exhausted, at a group of ancient and once very famous silver mines. From there on the travellers found, to their surprise, a stretch of newly constructed track leading quite to one side of the original survey and ending—simply nowhere.

But that was later. For the time being they had only to watch the straight, level right-of-way eat swiftly through the narrow strip of desert, become a gently winding,

A MYST' RIOUS DISAPPEARANCE 35

easy gradient amidst rolling lowlands, and turn finally into a tortuous, worm-like path boring patiently into the higher altitudes. With their guides and their beasts of burden (two burros and a llama) safe in the baggage car, they had nothing to do but to sit and smoke. Of talking they did little; it was too plainly the lull before action.

Thus they had travelled a day and a night, the scenery growing ever more and more magnificent, when a roughly dressed, moustachioed stranger, whose previous taciturnity had been emphasized by a slouched sombrero and a persistently averted face, turned suddenly around in the seat in front of them and remarked in gruff, illiterate Spanish:

"See that pile of bricks and stones over there, señors? That's Krieg's Casa, or what is left of it. Mighty interesting ruin—if you care about such things."

Krieg! The name recalled that vague and scarcely credible item—about a supposed suicide, as nearly as Purdy could re-

member. He wondered why he could recall it at all. Something unlikely in the whole narrative, probably, had made it stick in his memory. Tommy seemed to know about it, too, for he gazed at the heap of débris as if it were indeed the interesting ruin which the stranger pretended. A minute later the train came to a standstill.

"A hot box," announced Tommy, after rushing out to investigate with altogether more eagerness than the case seemed to call for. "What do you say to taking a look around? It's only a little way, and we've got lots of time."

Purdy shook his head. He had a constitutional disinclination for side issues once he was fairly embarked. But there appeared to be no reason to restrain Tommy. So with an amused smile at such boyish enthusiasm, he watched him disappear behind one of the casa's still standing walls. It was less than a quarter of a mile from the track. Yes, there was surely plenty of time.

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Fifteen minutes went by; then thirty; then three quarters of an hour. Tommy did not return. The engine blew a series of warning whistles which echoed with startling grandeur among the hills. The train began slowly to move—but still no Tommy. Purdy was vexed. Such carelessness, even if an appearance at the last minute made up for it now, would mean no end of trouble before they were through. He was about to lean forward and address some fretful remark to the stranger who had pointed out the infernal ruins in the first place, but the stir of mere annoyance had ceased to irritate his nerves, giving place to a cold, wire-like tension—the realization that something serious had taken place. The stranger was no longer in his section, nor—as investigation proved—anywhere on the train. The landscape outside the windows slipped past and downward with an ever-increasing momentum like something falling of its own weight.

CHAPTER IV

THE REFUGEES

IT WAS still possible to leap out and go back. No great amount of speed was being made. But Purdy returned to his place. If Tommy was as unreliable as all this—or if he had already come to the end of his inclination to proceed—his room would be better than his company. And if he had met with some kind of foul play, why—that was one of the fortunes of war. In such an enterprise a man's life must count for nothing.

Purdy would have liked to play the hero. It would have been so easy to waste time looking for the missing little paragrapher, for whom he had already conceived a rather unreasonable liking. His duty, however, was to the Service, and duty ordered him to

sit still, in seeming indifference, and to let himself be carried on toward his destination. Besides, how could he be sure that Tommy had not meant to lead him into some sort of a trap? It was hard to be forced to consider this possibility, but—Purdy reasoned bitterly—everything was hard. At that moment he certainly hated his job.

But on reaching the terminal, a tiny station half hidden in the clouds, the necessity of action revived his spirits. Tent, provisions, three ugly-looking half-breed guides, the burros, and the llama—the last for desperate stages where something almost supernaturally sure-footed might be needed—were all hurried from the baggage car. He did indeed notice that the rails had not come to an end. But beyond the station they were rusty. It was just like a South American company to leave an incompleted section dangling uselessly at the end of their road. Instinct told him to follow those rails—or was it merely curios-

ity?—but having been assured by the station-agent that nothing but construction trains had ever passed over them, he abandoned the idea. His own route lay a little more to the east.

The real journey had begun.

For several days all went well. He was approaching the *cordillera real*—stupendous hills the like of which he had never seen. He whistled gaily as he rode along—the guides on foot, ahead; the extra animals following them; he himself bringing up the rear. He seemed to have escaped from the troubles behind him. The troubles yet before did not for the moment matter.

Then one night he was awakened by the half-breeds talking around the campfire—for the air had become thin and cold, and the tropical swelter of the plains a memory. It was something unusual for them to talk and he wondered at their keeping awake after their hard day's tramp. Nor were they using the *lingoa geral*, or "common

speech" of their kind, but some sullen hill dialect which no white man could ever hope to understand. Also he had a vague notion that what had aroused him was another voice than theirs.

He took a cautious stroll about, but nothing out of the way was to be seen, and he decided that he must have been dreaming. The next day, however, the guides' feet seemed to be made of lead, and once they balked in open mutiny at the base of a trifling little ascent, on the pretext that they could not climb it. Purdy drew his automatic, and the caravan moved on. After that he stopped whistling. The sense of being free, beyond the reach of the unseen influences which had grudgingly watched his departure, no longer kept him company. The sunlight lost its brightness as well as its warmth. The solitude became appalling. He was nearing the region of unchronicled, untoward happenings, where Fear had appeared and turned men's hearts to water.

And he did not even know what handicap he might be carrying with him.

What surprised him most was the absence of refugees. He knew this was where they should come, and had expected to find the trail overrun with them. It was a wonderfully good trail, too. It might almost be called a road. Why should a fleeing population avoid a road? A road, above all things, is usually man's friend. Wasn't this the right one? Had he lost his way?

No; by noon there appeared on the skyline a huge gash, clean cut through the mountains as if by some gigantic sword. This, unquestionably, was the pass to Los Altos.

Leaving the main trail and taking a bee-line for this goal, he was soon with his party in a maze of narrow paths, like sheep tracks; and here at last the solitude was broken. A mist had drifted over the intervening valley, and coming toward him out of it was a man who seemed fresh from a personal encounter with the devil. He was better

dressed than the ordinary *peon*, and his well-fed cheeks, not yet sunken by forced marches on an empty stomach, made it clear that until recently he had been in very comfortable circumstances. But his garments were in tatters, and his face almost as pale as a Caucasian's, as if every drop of blood had been bled out of it.

"Hello, there!" cried Purdy in Spanish. "Am I headed right for the water-gap?"

"You're headed for it right enough," was the answer, spoken in the same language, but the tone savoring a great deal more of suspicion than of friendliness.

"And have I any chance of getting there? You look as if—as if a fellow might not, you know."

"A man can get there, señor, if he wants to go. And you won't need your tent."

"Why won't I need my tent?"

"Just beyond the gap there is a large *violetta*—and several scattered settlements this side of it."

"Well?"

"You'll find every cabin deserted."

Purdy drew the man toward him, and lowered his voice so that he might not be overheard.

"What's wrong with this infernal country?" he demanded.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"They say that a dragon comes out of the hills and devours women and children," he answered.

"What rot! You don't mean to tell me that you've ever seen it?"

"No, I haven't seen it, señor. I did not wait. It is better not to wait—and see too much. A black jaguar, for instance."

"What!" cried Purdy, his mind instantly reverting to that stray newspaper paragraph which he had come upon while looking for sterner matters—something about a jungle beast too huge to be brought down with ordinary ammunition.

"Si, señor. One might see a jaguar hiding in a tree and not afraid of bullets."

"Was it especially large, this one?" Purdy heard himself asking.

"No, not large—but black."

The fellow refused to say more, and resumed his way, throwing behind him a look that seemed freighted with incommunicable knowledge. Purdy forced a laugh, and told himself that he was on nothing more or less than a wild-goose chase. And for a time he almost believed it; there was something so medieval, absurd, and un-South American in the dragon story, and something so childish in the other.

Toward nightfall, however, came a more sinister interruption. They came upon a family party, led by a bony horse attached to a pair of drag-poles bearing a rough litter, which had stopped to rest. On the litter huddled a woman with two wretched babies in her lap; and by her side stood a man, brown and half naked. Starvation and

terror mingled in the dull blur which was his face.

Purdy, hurrying forward to greet them, was nearly overwhelmed by the torrent of semi-articulate complaint which the woman began to pour forth. The country behind them, she said, was cursed. There were devils there—devils that burned up the highways and devastated the forests. She had not seen them herself, but her husband had, and so had her husband's brother.

"Is that so?" asked Purdy, turning his attention to the man. "What have you seen? What are you running away from? You seem to have come a long way."

The man responded by pointing to a spot where the edge of a mountain rill had been trampled into mud by a drove of some unknown inhabitants of the wilderness, and clapped his hand to his nose in an inexplicable and utterly ridiculous gesture. But this time Purdy did not laugh. The man was too evidently mad.

Purdy finally dismissed the miserable group with a wave of his hand. They could do nothing for him, nor he for them. Their very distress had filled him with a sort of resentment. Why couldn't they at least have kept their reason, and been in a position to tell him something? Could that silly press dispatch have been right in saying that people were going insane from the hardships of travel? What hardships? He was having no trouble himself—at least not enough to grow insane over.

And yet—how was he going to maintain discipline among his already discontented guides? One could not always march behind them with drawn gun. Sometimes a man must sleep. And what was to hinder a sleeping man from being robbed and left—say with his throat cut?

He had seated himself upon a boulder the better to think over the situation while the camp was being pitched for the night. Confound Tommy! Here was where he was

needed. Silence had descended. The purl of the stream, punctuated by an occasional bleat from the llama, was the only sound. It struck Purdy suddenly that the silence was unnatural.

A few moments before he had heard the guides muttering among themselves—disputing, apparently. But now they had fallen speechless. A glance over his shoulder showed two of them crouching over the llama, busily adjusting its pack to its back. The third guide and the ponies were nowhere to be seen.

“Hold on, there!” shouted Purdy, jumping up and once more bringing his weapon into play.

The fellows started, broke into discordant laughter and dashed for the cover of the underbrush, the llama's pack sliding to the ground. He heard the shouts of their hidden companion and the sounds of horses driven recklessly, gradually ceasing in the distance.

They had got the better of him sooner than he had expected, and had made away with a good three fourths of the stores. But he still had the llama and its pack, and his own throat intact. Good luck, on the whole—rare good luck.

Purdy set about building a fire. He would make some coffee, eat a few hard biscuits, and turn in. But while looking for wood his eyes fell upon something shiny lying upon the ground. It was a small gold coin. In his haste to escape, one of the guides had dropped it.

A half-breed Indian with a gold coin! Somebody had followed them, somebody with things like these in his pocket. Purdy felt an uncomfortable stir in the roots of his hair. An impalpable web encompassed him. That which he went to meet had something to do with that which he had left behind. He had been unable to kick loose, to get a free start. And how lonely he was!

CHAPTER V

THE FATE OF THE PRIEST

BUT by dawn he was ready to resume his journey. Company, of a sort, would probably soon be plenty enough.

In the course of the day he did meet a few hill folk. But though all were in a state of more or less complete mental disorganization, not one had come from within the circle of high peaks toward which his way was tending. They had lived on the outskirts of the secret, had been moved by mere rumours, and had come around, not through, the mountains. As for the inhabitants of Los Altos, they must have taken another direction altogether. Why? What could mean this avoidance of roads? Surely they would not rush for the trackless northern *pampas*.

"Probably I'll find them safe in their homes, minding their own business," said Purdy to himself.

But he really had no such conviction. Already he had passed several huts and cabins—all deserted. They gave him an uncomfortable feeling. It would have been easier to contend against an army than this general emptiness.

However, he trudged on, now through a forest of dark conifers, now across comparative open spaces carpeted with gorgeous and seemingly unseasonable wild flowers; while from either side of the pass, half lost in the clouds, looked down pale, ghostly slopes of eternal snow.

It was nearly evening when he finally emerged from this sunken ravine and found himself upon the upturned edge, so to speak, of a great plateau. The sun at his back, setting early, sent the shadows of domed summits far out toward the centre of the expanse. The land in the middle distance,

evidently of alluvial formation, lay as flat as a lake and as large as a county. The air was as still as death. Not a thing stirred. Gradually, as the sun sank lower, the shadows crept farther and yet farther toward the distant eastern escarpments until they mingled with the hills themselves, rising higher and ever higher as far as the eye could reach. It was like a vast theatre with a back-drop of endless perspective representing some malignant Country of the Giants. But the play was over. The stage was empty. The lights were being put out. He had come too late.

Such was his first thought. But a moment's observation showed him that the theatre might not yet be empty after all. In a hollow of the slope almost directly beneath his feet was what looked like a deeper shadow upon the general dusk. Scrutiny resolved it into a cluster of shadows. This was Los Altos. He had arrived.

Night is no time for exploration, so having

unburdened the llama, made camp, and partaken of a scanty meal, he rolled himself in a blanket and tried to sleep. But sleeping was difficult. The vicinity of a spot where men have shown the white feather and abandoned their homes to bats is no place for pleasant dreams. He longed to surprise some movement, some sign of human life, if it were only a cry of distress or the challenge of an enemy. But all was as silent as a landscape on the moon.

However, not even night can last forever, and when he finally set foot within the village he had at least the company of sunshine. The place was already familiar from descriptions which Tommy had been careful to collect; one or two decent houses, built by white traders, a surrounding area of native huts, and an outer circle of shapeless, skin-made tepees. Everything looked as he had expected it to look. Only, there was nobody in the streets, nor at the windows to see him pass. Most of the doors stood

open, but without inviting entrance. The sun cast fantastic shadows upon these sills, shadows that were hard and sharp, and deeper than seemed natural. The gaping interiors were repellent.

Conquering his aversion, Purdy entered hut after hut. He came upon no one, dead or alive. There had at least been no pestilence, which was one relief. Such poor furniture as the places were likely ever to have contained rested untouched. Nothing but bare necessities had been carried away.

The better class of houses showed a like state of things, and he made his way to the public square, where the main and generally level street met the mountain road. He stood for a moment in front of the squat Jesuit mission, which was the principal building in the settlement. Here was the roomy plaza of what had once been a prosperous *puebla*. There were said to be mineral deposits in the vicinity, as well as game

and dye-woods. It had been a great place for traders. But the traders were gone.

Purdy shouted. The only answer was his own voice thrown back from the inscrutable peaks. He could have borne the emptiness of the huts and tepees. It does not take much to drive away a semi-barbarous, almost nomadic population. But what of the decent houses whose inhabitants must have been of a blood more nearly akin to his own? What, above all, of the building annexed to the church, which must have been the priest's?

He examined the exterior of the priest's house minutely. Though of wood, it bore, like the church, some traces of gaudy painting, some indications of an attempt at architecture. But of that which he sought to know it had nothing to say.

Stepping resolutely through the door, he explored the interior—without result. It was just a collection of vacant rooms. Finally he came upon a door which was closed.

Cautiously he pushed it open. It gave upon a narrow, arbour-like passage, boarded in against the weather and leading, as was apparent, toward the church itself. A sort of alcove near the farther end had probably served as the sacristy. Here was the priest's own writing-table; a rusty pen; a bottle of dried-up ink, and a lot of letter-paper scattered along the passage as if swept to the floor by the hurrying skirt of a cassock.

A moment later, following the trail of paper, Purdy found himself within the chancel, where in service time he would have been facing the rude, unlettered congregation which doubtless had so often crowded the rustic nave and transepts. But now the benches, instead of being in stiff and solemn rows, were tossed in heaps. The Stations of the Cross—rude chromos that had once given a touch of colour to the undecorated walls—were torn and trampled. The cross itself had been thrown down.

Purdy's eyes went slowly from its vacant

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place on the altar to its present position on the floor. He felt his heart begin suddenly to beat like a hammer. For there, near the cross, lay a still figure. Tonsure and vestment identified it beyond a doubt. The priest had died at his post.

Here, at last, was a witness. The people of Los Altos had left a clue to what had overtaken them. But the clue was a riddle. The lips of the witness were sealed. Is there not a proverb which says that dead men tell no tales?

Purdy, who knew that in spite of proverbs the dead are sometimes loquacious, knelt down before the prostrate form. Something crumpled and white showed between the cold fingers. It was a bit of paper. He gained possession of this with difficulty, for the fingers seemed reluctant to part with what they held. Then he seated himself on an overturned bench, spread out the paper on his knee—and became lost in thought. Once perused, it would no longer be a piece

of paper merely. It would be a voice. He could almost hear it already, echoing among the exposed rafters overhead. But when he finally gave his attention to the lines their import was disappointing. He read:

My people are insane with fear. They have risen against their God, and are gathering outside to kill me—as if I had brought this thing. I am going now to make one more effort to control them. But the events of the past week have hurled them back into savagery, and I am afraid that I shall fail. I cannot even make them flee in the right direction. Their souls are like the wheat through which Samson's foxes scattered with the firebrands. Alas, how terribly apt that figure is! We are consumed with terror which is like a flame, and a flame which is terror itself. If only I knew more. But I am like a child babbling an incredible tale. However, I have made certain of much; and if worst comes to the worst, and this paper be found by some friend from the outside world, let him read on carefully. This jungle terror——

A ragged edge closed the sentence. Purdy hunted in vain for the rest of the note. Whatever had torn it in two had made away with the final half—if the final half had ever

been written. More likely the garrulous old priest had wasted too much time with his homilies and now God alone knew what he had wished to reveal.

There was nothing more to be discovered, and Purdy, finding a pick and shovel, ripped up a few boards from in front of the altar and performed as best he could the pious office of rendering dust to dust. Used to an adventurous life the mere presence of death affected him but little. And yet as he stood there looking thoughtfully down at the new-made grave, he was moved to swear a solemn oath that the cause of this martyr's death should not remain unknown.

CHAPTER VI

THE PORTENT

THERE was a sudden clatter in the world outside and Purdy hurried to the door. Two horses were racing through the village street, one bearing an empty saddle, the other carrying a man. Though his head was swathed in a bandage there was no mistaking Tommy.

"Lord! but you've been making tracks," he cried, leaping to the ground. "I was beginning to think you had seven-league boots."

Purdy regarded him. Company was grateful, certainly, but he could not forget on the instant that this young fellow had much to explain. Tommy shook hands enthusiastically, and then drew back.

"Say!" he exclaimed; "you don't think I cut away intentionally, do you?"

"I don't know what to think," Purdy responded. "Your coming back seems to argue that you didn't. But I'm not sure you're going to be of any use to me—a man who loses trains—or his nerve, maybe. What's the answer?"

"See here, man! You left me—to die for all you knew. And you don't hear me complaining, do you? No, sir. I understood. You had your job, and you did quite right. But if you're going to think that I got cold feet, or maybe—well, there's nothing left for me but to hike it back. But here are your ponies. It's a wonder you wouldn't recognize them."

Purdy melted instantly, and held out his hand.

"Forgive me, old chap," he said. "I ought to have known. But up here a man begins to think he's going woozy and distrusts even himself—let alone other people. Tell me, what happened to you?"

"In the first place," began Tommy, ap-

peased, and sitting down with his friend upon the church steps, while the ponies panted wearily at the end of their bridle reins, "in the first place, I had a reason for going over that *casa*. The original hint of anything wrong in this neck of the woods came from there. It was a little thing, which never got into print—the story of a pond that would suddenly have ripples all over it when there wasn't any wind. It seemed ridiculous, but it set me thinking. Then came a report that the *casa* had been wrecked by a curse which a witch-doctor had put upon it, and that Krieg, the man who'd lived there, had been frightened into killing himself. I didn't believe all the silly details, but I wanted to get a glimpse of the ruins. I had heard a few things about this Krieg before, and thought that his suicide, after he'd been seen alive about the wreck, sounded fishy. If he was really dead, I thought I ought to find a body, or something. Nobody would have been likely to

disturb it—there was too much superstition around.

“So I was nosing among what remained of the walls, listening all the while for a whistle from the train, when something rapped me over the head—and the next thing I knew it was night, and I was lying on my back studying astronomy. I’d been left for dead, I gathered, and there wasn’t a soul, let alone a train, to be seen.

“Later, those nice guides of yours came back my way, and I thought you were probably done for. But I still had my money on me, and had no trouble in getting the ponies and a sack of grub. I fancy they thought they were being bribed again. They were certainly flush when I left them. But I couldn’t get any information from their gabble. And—well, here I am.”

Purdy, touched by such adventures so simply told, unfolded his own. Tommy listened attentively. But evidently his curiosity was not satisfied.

"Haven't you seen anything—peculiar?" he asked.

"Nothing but what I have told you. Isn't that peculiar enough? Of course it isn't 'sheep plague'."

"Oh, did you read that? I got so mad there one time having stories suppressed that I just thought I'd give them *that* to get even. But you haven't seen any burnt things—nor hollows, for instance?"

"What do you mean?"

"I stuck to the main trail longer I guess than you did," the journalist observed. "Quite a stunning trail—a regular boulevard. You must have noticed. Mighty curious thing, here in the wilderness. That extension of the Los Altos railroad, too. I followed that for a way, till it simply quit on me. Not a house in sight. That isn't exactly usual, for a railroad. But the trail—there was one place where it looked as if it had been scooped out—fresh dirt—I don't know exactly how to describe it. But it was

as clean as if a sand-blast had been run over it. And the trees—they were scorched, that's all there is to it."

"It must have been lightning."

"I suppose it must have been," assented Tommy, but without conviction; "lightning—for a quarter of a mile!"

"What else could it have been?"

"That's just the point. But there's another thing."

The men had risen and were looking toward the sun, as if it had occurred to them simultaneously that it was time to be thinking of moving on to some place more pleasant for the night's camp. Purdy walked across the street to where the llama was feeding, turned the beast loose to follow at will, and strapped the pack it had been carrying to the back of his recovered burro.

"Well, what is it? What other thing?" he finally asked.

"I was on my back among the ruins, as I told you," Tommy answered, "and was

staring at the stars, trying to collect my wits. Maybe I dreamed it, but I thought that a face suddenly stooped down from somewhere and looked at me."

"It must have been a dream, for you say you found nobody about."

"A funny dream, though. It scared me, naturally, and I shut my eyes, expecting to be knocked out for keeps every minute. I thought at first it was that fellow who sat in the seat ahead of us on the train. And then I realized that it hadn't been a man's face at all."

"Not a man's face?"

"No; but I remember seeing once that pretty French maid that you say locked you in at the Presidente's."

"Tommy!" cried Purdy, leaping into the saddle, "let's get on. You are a stark, raving lunatic."

The moment they pushed forward beyond the abandoned *villeta* it was evident that they were following in the wake of the

departed mob. The ground was trampled, but not a living creature was to be seen.

"I don't understand it," said Purdy, finally. "These people were running in the wrong direction—as the priest said they would. One would think the danger came from——"

"Maybe they ran toward it—in an attack," suggested Tommy. "We haven't found any packs or household goods, or anything like that. It looks almost as if we were trailing after a well-drilled army."

"An army wouldn't have women and children with it," Purdy objected. "Haven't you noticed the shreds of petticoats on the bushes? No, it was the mob all right. And I should say that something came up very suddenly—behind it. There ought to be stragglers, though. In a village of that size there must have been some who could not travel very far, and their friends could hardly carry them forever. We'll have somebody to talk to before the day is over."

But the day was already advanced, and it drew to a close without this prophecy being fulfilled. The two travellers had reached the middle of the plateau. About them was an apparently unbroken ring of snow-capped peaks. The sun was setting behind Los Altos in their rear—a yellow globe, sharp, distinct, unfamiliar.

“Do you know what that looks like to me?” said Tommy, with an attempt at laughter. “It looks like the yolk of an egg. And it’s going to be broken on the edge of a frying-pan. Watch!”

Purdy smiled. It did indeed look rather like an egg. And the circular plane with its edge of hills was sufficiently suggestive of a pan. There was even a stupendous peak towering above the others in the distance ahead to serve as handle. Then, as if to carry out the figure, the mists, rising slowly from the ground, were suddenly streaked with yellow.

“We’re in an omelet,” cried Tommy, dis-

mounting at the spot where they were to pass the night.

But Purdy wasn't listening. He stood, drawn to his full height, his back to the sunset, his breath coming and going with that ecstatic sense of danger which comes to the true campaigner when a foe, long sought, declares his presence and takes his stand.

"Anyway, we're no longer alone in the world," he declared, pointing.

Tommy exclaimed. There could be no doubt of what he saw. Rising from the base of one of the foot-hills in the very direction of their journey was a filmy but unmistakable column of smoke.

CHAPTER VII

DEATH'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

SHORTLY after daybreak the smoke arose again—now like a beckoning finger. A while afterward it disappeared, but Purdy and Tommy had already taken its bearings, and advanced toward the spot.

The ground began to rise, at first gradually, and then with an ever-steeper ascent. It was no longer bare, but covered with tall, misshapen bushes and later with a growth of mountain conifers. In an open grove of these they halted. Before them lay what had once been the body of a man. It was torn almost to shreds. Farther on there were other bodies and others. It was like a battlefield.

"All natives as far as I can make out," Purdy observed. "I wonder——"

"Look!"

Tommy pointed with an unsteady index toward a figure lying by itself. It was clothed in blue overalls, with a workman's blouse and cap.

"A white man!"

"And a labourer, Tommy. That's not South American."

"Anyway, he was killed like a Christian—a blow in the head. Not like some of these others."

In a few minutes they had counted a score of these overalled corpses. Some had been killed "like Christians," others in a manner not to be described.

"Women and children, too," continued Purdy, moving steadily forward. "What do you make of it?"

"Some of their clothes are—scorched!"

Tommy's teeth were all but chattering, but Purdy only nodded. He had come to the stump of a mighty evergreen—broken off short. And beyond it there was a dis-

tinct swath cut through the forest, as if the trees had been stalks of grass mown by a scythe.

"Scorched—cut—broken. I think we've seen enough here. Let's go on."

"All right. Have—have you got a flask with you? Mine is empty."

Purdy gave his companion a critical, appraising glance, and handed him some brandy. The colour returned to the boyish, too loosely moulded face, and a defiant, reckless carriage to the shoulders. Here, should the worst happen, was a sadly broken reed to lean upon. But the march was resumed without a word. And the ponies, which had been almost unmanageable in the neighbourhood of death, again permitted themselves to be ridden. The llama had disappeared.

"One thing about this country—it *looks* peaceful," said Tommy some hours later. "Now that my blood is in circulation again, hang me if I don't believe we dreamed it—

about those dead men. There were too many of them to be real."

Purdy, his attention fixed on something to one side on the ground, said nothing.

They were now skirting a beautiful little lake, which nestled in a fold of the hills and reflected the serene morning sky from a surface as untroubled as that of a mirror. Then, just as they were about to turn their backs upon it, the lake seemed to shiver, broke into innumerable ripples, and finally sent a wave splashing loudly against the shore. Purdy leaped down and touched the water cautiously with his finger.

"As cold as ice! A geyser ought to be warm."

"But this isn't a geyser."

"What then?"

"*Quien sabe?* I told you I'd heard of a pond that rippled without any wind. This is another one."

Tommy was quite collected by this time. A little brandy now and then, and never a

drop too much—that appeared to be the medicine. But it wouldn't do to trust it too far. For instance, Purdy did not dare mention what he had seen just before coming to the lake—the body of the llama lying stone dead in the underbrush.

It was about mid-afternoon when they came upon a tiny log cabin with a pile of smouldering embers before it. This was evidently the source of the smoke which had served as their guide across the plateau. A battered collection of pots and pans carelessly washed and left to dry in the sun told of masculine housekeeping, but at first there appeared to be nobody about. Then the cheerful sound of a pick came to their ears, and farther on they saw a little hump-backed old man working busily and peacefully at the mouth of a shallow drift cut into a shelf of crumbling quartz, as if this were some placer claim in sunny California. He would pound his takings fine, scoop them up in an enormous skillet, and wash

them out at a mountain rivulet which flowed near as if for his special benefit.

His back was toward the intruders, and when Purdy called out he did not pay the slightest attention. He seemed deaf. Then Tommy, who was walking ahead, picked up a handful of gravel and threw it. The old man wheeled as the gravel stones fell about him and uttered a cry of surprise in which there was an element not only of fear but of ferocious delight. Only one word was clearly distinguishable—"goggles!" And as he uttered it he snatched a clumsy-looking revolver from his pocket, and fired.

His movements were quick and jerky, but Purdy's were quicker. He had shot and winged his man at the first hostile sign, and the bullet which might have dropped Tommy in his tracks went wild.

"Yankees!" groaned the miner, clutching his wounded arm and coming forward, his face twisted with pain. "If I'd only

'a' known. Mebbe, though, you're as bad as any of 'em. You never kin tell."

"Who are you?" demanded Purdy, speaking very loud. "And what do you mean by trying to pot strangers this way? I simply had to shoot. Did I hurt you much?"

"I reckon you hurt me a good deal, partner. I'm a bit deaf, and you came on me kinda sudden. But my arm ain't broke. Help me off with this shirt, will you? My name's Briggs. Tear off somethin' for a bandage. Damn slug went clean through me. I'm bleedin' to death."

"Let it bleed—it will do you good," said Purdy, producing a surgical kit from the pack of the burro he had all the time been holding firmly by the bridle. "But what if we did come upon you suddenly? Any reason up here for being afraid of people in general?"

A look of child-like cunning stole into the hunchback's wrinkled face.

"I ain't sayin' nothing," he muttered.

"There ain't nothing to say. But if you was to want to stake out a claim alongside of mine I wouldn't say nothing, either. The ground is rich—rich, I tell you. And I been gittin' lonesome peggin' away here by myself."

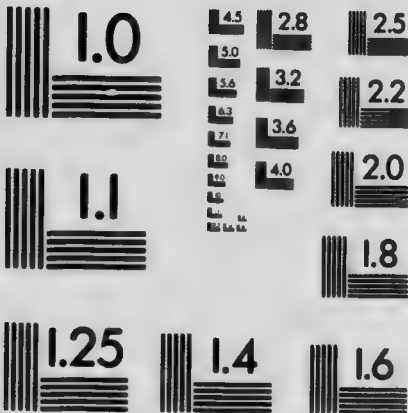
"The fellow has found gold," Purdy remarked to Tommy later, when they had all eaten a comfortable supper of the miner's providing and the miner himself had retired to his bunk in the cabin to get such sleep as his wound might permit. The campfire blazed brightly. It was an hour which invited a pipe and a general summing up of the situation.

"He seems friendly, too," said Tommy, lazily stretching himself before the blaze. "That's what I can't understand—after the way he first received us."

"It's plain enough that he took you for someone else—that's the answer. When he saw you he shouted out: 'There's them goggles!' or something like that. You were



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ahead, and you were wearing goggles, too. Remember?"

"That's right. I hadn't taken them off since the sun-glare on the plateau began to hurt my eyes. We're to look out for a man with goggles, then."

"I think so, Tommy. Anyway, we're to look out for a man. And when you come to consider the matter, that's about the worst thing one ever does have to look out for."

"But why don't Briggs talk? He wants us to stay."

"He wants us to keep him company. He's afraid to stay here alone. But yet he doesn't quite trust us. Don't know as we can blame him for that."

"Are we to trust him?"

"You're right, Tommy. One of us had better keep awake, turn about. The trouble with Briggs is, he's in a panic. Only his gold keeps him here. No telling what a frightened man will do—especially when you

don't know what he's frightened about. But here he comes now."

Briggs had appeared in the doorway, and began to complain about his arm. Purdy renewed the dressing, noted that the wound showed no signs of inflammation, and invited the hunchback to sit a while by the fire. The invitation was accepted, but the conversation clung persistently to the commonplace. Briggs seemed interested only in his mine. He had been prospecting for silver, he said, when he had accidentally discovered gold, and—having since then lost his partner—was now "naturally hankerin' to hear the English language."

"See here, old chap," broke in Purdy, finally. "I'm not a miner, but I'm not exactly a tenderfoot, either. Something is wrong up here. Never mind the gold. Tell us about the—whatever it is that's loose."

Briggs looked uncomfortable.

"There ain't nothing to tell," he began,

reluctantly, "except a lot of superstitious nonsense. You ain't the sort to pay no attention to such like foolishness, be you?"

"What became of your partner?"

"More'n I know. He wandered off and never come back. That was some time ago. Megrums, I guess. His name was Weisner."

"Did he ever wear goggles?"

Briggs jumped up from the log where he had been sitting, and declaimed, excitedly:

"I don't know anything about any man with goggles. There ain't any such man up here."

"Well, then," said Purdy, "what *is* up here?"

Briggs paced about a bit, and reseated himself.

"I'll tell you what it is. Sometimes, mostly in the middle of the night, there comes—it's a bad smell, that's what it is. Don't be took surprised if it comes to-night."

"Must be some volcanic vent-holes in the

neighbourhood," put in Tommy, with a touch of irony.

"Volcanoes? Not this way, partner. Besides, it ain't brimstan. The smell is more like—like an old cellar."

Tommy laughed outright, but Purdy remained thoughtful. He remembered the pantomime indulged in by one of the refugees—he had held his nose.

"I believe Briggs is telling the truth," he said to Tommy when the miner had gone back to the cabin; "about everything excepting the man with goggles, that is. Perhaps if we can win a little more of his confidence——"

But Tommy, wearied by the events of the day, had fallen asleep. Purdy left his sentence unfinished, refilled his pipe, and prepared for a lonely vigil. He thought of all that had happened since the receipt of the cablegram: Lara's offer of a bribe; the prank of the pretended French maid; the meeting with the elusive stranger on the train;

Tommy's experiences at Krieg's Casa; the murdered priest; Tommy's tale of scooped-out roads and scorched vegetation; the bodies of panic-stricken villagers and the yet more unaccountable dead men in overalls, some merely bruised, some torn to shreds; the snapped tree-stems; the apparently uncaused wave across the bosom of a placid lake; the mysteriously slain llama; the hunchback's fear of men with goggles, and now his yet more ridiculous yarn. Could any explanation be found which would bring all these and several other things together into one comprehensible and logical whole? Or were he and Tommy the victims of so many unrelated caprices of fortune?—of nature?—yes, though he hated to consider it, of the supernatural?

It was an hour for such thoughts. The fire had died down. No sound, not even a companionable snore, came from either of his companions. Purdy must have dozed,

for he opened his eyes suddenly with the confused memory of a sharp hissing sound in his ears.

"What is it?" asked Tommy, drowsily, raising himself on his elbow.

"Nothing, I guess. I only thought I heard something."

There had been nothing in the sky but the shadow of the night and the presences of the stars. But now something was altered. Purdy could not have said what it was, but the stars seemed to grow dim in the cloudless atmosphere—tarnished, like brilliants breathed upon by some unearthly monster.

From far off in the forest there came a cry, as of an animal stung to madness by sudden fear or pain. A movement—it could be called nothing more—passed just above the tree-tops, leaving behind it a faint but unmistakable odour of mud.

CHAPTER VIII

PURDY'S WALK

IN THE morning Purdy started out alone for a walk. He had, he told Tommy, the ghost of an idea—perhaps the beginning of the thread of which the problem he had come to solve was woven—and he wanted to think it out. All these phenomena—traced upon the ground, in the water, in the heavens, in the quaking hearts of men and women—had one thing in common: They suggested evil. Here ought to be a clue.

He had every intention of making his walk a short one, but the hills were like magnets, and the sight of the plateau, spreading wider and wider beneath him every time he turned to look back, filled his mind with a sort of intoxication. Being

more used to the labyrinths of cities than to those of the wild he paid less attention than he should to where he was going. It seemed sufficient to note that he was always climbing.

Then he yielded to the lure of a natural aisle, and turned aside. Here, with an easier gradient, he made such rapid progress that soon he found himself shut in by pinnacles of rock. From being a man creeping up a roof he had become a man wandering in the cellars of a Brobdignagian castle. The sense of expanse, of freedom, left him. No longer did the air seem supercharged with ozone. There came a choking sensation at the throat. The cliffs towered about, higher and higher. It was almost as if they had sprouted, or at least grown enormously, since he came among them. His neck began to ache with the effort of looking upward. It was time to go back. One could not think out problems here.

But the sun had disappeared behind a film of wintry haze, making it difficult to locate the points of the compass; and as he had not mounted directly from the plain, mere going down hill would never take him to his starting point. It was necessary to retrace his steps with every twist and turn which they had made. But how? The aisle, instead of being a single cut in the rock, proved to be a dozen aisles, branching off into innumerable transepts—a devil's cathedral.

Staggering with fatigue, and a little giddy, he chose a cushion of dry moss, leaned his back against a boulder—and almost immediately fell asleep. When he awoke—was it minutes or hours afterward?—everything seemed to have changed. The scene, as he remembered it, was a confusion of palisades heaped one upon the other in a terrific riot, and a great central peak towering above the rest like a chief amongst a retinue of lesser sky-lords. Now the peak

was gone. The canopy of haze had become a low, leaden roof whose weight he could all but feel upon his shoulders. Every recollection of the way he had come had been blotted out by strange and threatening dreams.

Thoroughly alarmed, he chose the route which looked the least unfamiliar—only to see its familiarity vanish more completely with every step. Possibly he might in coming have passed that bank of flowers, that glowed now with such a vivid purple, on his right. He might—though he could not understand how—have gone unseeing by a waterfall hanging like a silver veil from the eaves of a basaltic battlement far overhead. But he could never have encountered those two figures of stone, roughly shaped like human forms, which arose, as if alive, in his path. Now; he was beholding things which neither his own nor any other human eye had ever rested on before.

He was lost. He could not even find the

spot where he had stopped to rest. Progress of any sort became almost impossible. He had, unconsciously, been hurrying; and, strong and hardy as he was for a city man, he had frequently to lean against some rock or tree to regain his breath. At long intervals—was it this day, or the next?—he would point the muzzle of his automatic into the air and fire, hoping that some friendly ear might hear the report. The result was always startling. Shots would sound from every direction—at first close at hand, then at greater and greater distances, suggesting a pack of scattering dogs. Then the silence would creep back and hedge him about as with an invisible barrier, and it would be several minutes before he could realize that he had only been mocked by the complications of a mountain echo. But when he reached his last cartridge, some obscure hunter's instinct stayed his hand, bidding him save this bullet for a yet more desperate and final need.

It grew bitterly cold, and he thought of a new expedient. He remembered how he and Tommy had been guided by the smoke of the hunchback's camp. Before it grew too dark again he must build a fire. Perhaps he had travelled in circles and not wandered so far, after all. Tommy and Briggs might see it. But though he collected a great heap of dry brush and piled green stuff on top of the blaze, night fell without a sign of succor. In vain he strained his ears. The hoped-for sound of an answering gun did not come.

Again he fell asleep. Ages seemed to pass in blackness and silence. Then there came noise and confusion. He awoke with a cry. A sharp, hot pain stung his cheek. Overhead, not more than twenty feet from his face, was a monster, clothed in a yellow flame, that writhed and twisted, and complained with a voice like that of the wind or a worried beast. The note of the slain priest had spoken of flames. But here was

not the looked-for solution of the mystery. His own fire had merely crawled up a splintered pine and was spreading among the dead branches. Purdy got from beneath barely in time to escape an avalanche of burning wood. But rest had put new strength into his muscles. He resumed his way.

Though not yet morning, it was light. The forest appeared to be afire all around him. An ever-growing roar was in his ears. It seemed incredible that the destructive element should have made such progress. Stranger still, the roaring increased as he went. Could it be fire which made that loud but sweet and limpid music?

Something cold suddenly embraced his feet and ankles. He was in the midst of a mountain torrent. This, not the flames, was what made the music. He discovered that he was very thirsty, and let himself sink to his knees, burying his face in the delicious

eddies and nearly losing his balance and drowning. When he reached the other bank, he determined to stay there. Much might happen before he starved to death, and he need not again run the risk of thirst. Yet his matches were damp, and the wetting had rendered him doubly cold. It seemed a pity to freeze so near to a raging holocaust. Only a single brand was needed.

He got back to the fire without difficulty. Though much less extensive than he had supposed, it shone like a red eye through the forest. He even found the very tree beneath which he had couched. But he did not secure a blazing branch; he stared in front of him like a man in a trance. Sticking into the tree-trunk not far from where his head had been was a long and slender knife.

He waited till ghostly forms on high told of sunlight on the peaks, and resumed his wanderings, giddy from lack of food but finding plenty of water. The torrent was

the crookedest stream imaginable. He came across it every little while, forded it again and again, and in the end forgot which side he was on. Or perhaps there were a dozen different torrents. It did not matter. That night he buried himself under a heap of pine needles. There was some creature abroad on his trail—some creature which was attracted by fire and could hurl knives into the bole of a tree. That was the thought which pursued him. Later—he did not know how much later—he aroused himself and went on again, moved by that stubborn sense of duty which is a part of the Anglo-Saxon blood. He had ceased to hope. Tommy would come to the conclusion that the worst had happened. He might even now be gone, and in any case could never arrive in time to be of any use. There were no provisions. The keen air sapped vitality at its very root. Life had become a nightmare.

Often Purdy came to precipices, and some-

times imagined himself upon dizzy brinks which did not in fact exist. Images whirled continually before his vision—sometimes of terror, sometimes the soft, seductive images of approaching delirium. Time had gone completely out of the universe.

Once, after he had passed over a region of dry rocks, the world became suddenly white and dazzling. Something beneath his feet gave like feathers and clung like glue. It was snow. He was tempted to fill himself with this treacherous substitute for food and drink; and to avoid yielding he let himself drift toward the lower levels, walking automatically upon legs that had forgotten the meaning of weariness.

Another time he fell; and instead of trying to get up again, drew his weapon, pressing the muzzle eagerly against his temple. Was not this moment as good as another for that last, carefully treasured bullet? Yet he did not pull the trigger. Suicide, when brought so near, revealed it-

self as a form of surrender. He would at least wait. Perhaps, if he lived long enough, he would learn—what he had come to learn.

If only he could keep his mind clear, and distinguish realities from dreams. Not for hours had he been alone. At one time it would be Tommy who walked beside him; at another, Briggs; a man in goggles; or Lara's pretended nursery maid. Oftenest it was the maid. He could not forget her, and sometimes it seemed as if she were the heart of the whole mystery.

"It is strange that I don't suffer more," he kept saying aloud in his more lucid intervals. "Starvation is not as horrible as the books say it is."

Afterward he would return to imaginary conversations with the shadows about him, dimly conscious that there was something real beneath his fancies. Often now he fell. He became bruised, bleeding—a thing dreadful to see. The time came when the next collapse promised to be the last. He

stumbled forward in a heap and lay still. It was about sunset in the world below. Mechanically he covered himself with leaves and broken branches. He would dream no more. Here would be his grave.

Yet he awoke—and was at once convinced that the final shreds of his reason were gone. Beside him he saw a basket—food—drink. It required every atom of his will to limit himself to a drop and a morsel. The meat, the liquor—they were substantial. His mind cleared. Leading from the basket was a thread, seemingly without end. Either he was mad indeed, or it had been put there to tempt him on.

CHAPTER IX

THE CATAclysm

IN THE old fable it was a thread (or, as some say, a hair from the head of Ariadne) which led Theseus from the labyrinth after he had slain the Minotaur. In Purdy's case, his enemy being still alive, the trail was much more likely to be an invitation to destruction than an escape. But he was far too desperate now even to hesitate, and soon found himself standing at the thread's farther end.

Before him was a cliff, about two hundred feet high, in the face of which was a narrow, almost perpendicular, fissure. The rough sides of this fissure afforded a series of footholds, a sort of natural ladder; but he had not climbed it very far before he discovered that wherever a rock-knob was lacking its

place had been supplied by an iron peg skillfully set in an artificially drilled hole. Common prudence called for a halt; but he was beyond prudence.

The top of the cliff revealed a bit of sloping tableland, or meadow, several acres in extent and covered with a heavy growth of tufted grass. Across the meadow lay a well-worn path, ending at a second cliff very much like the first. The grass was everywhere green and luxuriant save along the borders of the path, where it was seared and brown, as if from blight. The path terminated abruptly at the entrance to a cave.

This was so obviously the lion's mouth that even Purdy, overwrought as he was, paused for a moment. But all paths emanate a certain fascination, and this one fairly beckoned.

The cave proved to be a mere tunnel, penetrating the mountain for a few yards and ending in—emptiness. Purdy stopped.

He seemed to be looking into a cavern without floor, ceiling, or sides. Only shadows interrupted the gaze above, beneath, or beyond—shadows diluted by a pale light which streamed from some undefined source, as though the rock-drip were phosphorescent.

Creeping on his hands and knees, he came to the edge of the abyss—and suddenly drew his breath in sharply through his teeth with a hiss that echoed and reëchoed as if all the inner spaces of the earth were alive with snakes. What he had seen was his own face looking up at him. The abyss was no abyss, but a mirror, an expanse of darkly glittering liquid with a surface as smooth as quicksilver. As he gazed, fascinated, he noticed that the mirror's depths were faintly streaked with green, hair-like wisps. The substance was not quite homogeneous. And in the air he breathed there was a slightly fetid odour—suggestive of slime.

Purdy felt the need of a smoke. It had been days now since he had been able to

get a light from his water-soaked matches, and there was something extremely disagreeable in the fumes from the pool. A puff or two of tobacco was what he wanted before proceeding farther. It might rid his lungs of that painful weight which was beginning to distress them, and relieve the dizziness and the heaviness of the eyelids which went with it.

Smoke? Why not? There, as if created by his thought, lay a package of cigarettes and a box of matches almost beneath his hand.

Scarcely knowing what he did, he struck a match. Almost immediately the silence of the cave was shaken by a moan of terror. Something—he took it for an animal at first—was coming toward him along the edge of the pool. It whimpered and stumbled as it came, and just as he completed the lighting of his cigarette, revealed itself as a man—a man of enormous stature, and fat for his height, wearing a sort of mask with goggles. He was trying to make for

the entrance. Purdy got to his feet and put himself in the way.

"Back, you fool, back!" cried the man, in a thick, guttural voice, and drawing a revolver.

Purdy waited with the supreme indifference of semi-stupor, but the bullet did not come.

"Trying to bluff me, are you?" he muttered. "Come to think of it, I have a shot yet left myself."

Had he been in his right senses, certainly he would not have touched a weapon now. He was completely covered, and at that range the other could hardly miss. As it was, he drew with great deliberation and aimed at his enemy's head.

"*Nein! Nein!* Don't shoot here, for the lof of *Gott!*" The man in goggles shoved his mask aside, dropped his revolver, and fell to his knees. His attitude, with his hands clasped together, suggested not only surrender but prayer.

In disgust, and obeying one of the crazy impulses which were in possession of his brain, Purdy tossed his own weapon aside.

"What's the matter, old Specs? Are you sick?"

"Ja, sick. You schmoke! Give it very carefully, to me, or we die."

For some reason or other he was actually afraid of the cigarette.

"You brought me here, with your damned thread," laughed Purdy, drawing on his luckily discovered talisman and removing it from his lips with a flourish. "Wanted me to die alone, only I arrived too soon for your get-away. Is that it?"

"Give me that schmoke und we both live. I give you back your life."

He crept close as he spoke and tried to take the cigarette in his hand. Purdy held it out of his reach—and felt himself gently lifted and carried from the cave. He was as helpless as a baby.

But the first breath of outside air revived

him somewhat, and he no sooner felt the ground again beneath his feet than he caught his captor by the arm. A terrific struggle ensued, the stranger's one object appearing to be escape, while Purdy held him back with all the desperate energy of incipient madness. In spite of himself he was slowly dragged along. In vain he tried to catch the tufted grass between his feet. The grass was torn out by the roots. Still inanely clutching the cigarette, he lost ground continually. The cave-mouth receded. He could not fight the slope. And he began to realize that away from the cave meant toward the cliff.

As a last resort he relaxed his efforts, feigning exhaustion, then put every atom of his force into a single, skilful lunge, and managed to get his gigantic but clumsy antagonist squarely to the ground. But the cigarette, too, had fallen—upon the border of dead grass beside the path.

A spot of flame, almost invisible in the

bright sunshine, spread rapidly up the slope. It was remarkable how the grass burned. Watching it with an almost hypnotized interest, Purdy loosened his hold.

With a frenzied gasp the goggled man was up and away.

"Retten Sie Sich! Spring für's leben!"

The words shot over his shoulder less like a friendly warning than like the involuntary exclamation of one who sees a fellow being in imminent peril and speaks without stopping to think.

Purdy yielded to the suggestion, and ran frantically for several yards. Then he reflected. Might not this be a ruse? From what should he save himself? Why should he run for his life? There are many safer pastimes than rushing headlong down an incline toward the edge of a precipice. The edge, in fact, was nearer than he thought, and he had to fling himself flat on his face to avoid being swept into space by his own momentum.

Nothing in a lifetime of adventure had ever affected him with such a sense of helplessness, such horror, as being the puppet of the unseen, of the inexplicable, as what immediately followed. Prompted by instinct, he had looked back toward the cave—and now saw the whole mountain side gradually lift itself into the air and disappear. The movement must have been of awful swiftness, but in comparison with his racing thoughts it seemed slow. Never for an instant did he connect it with any idea of an explosion.

Next came the turning topsy-turvy of natural law. He felt himself shooting out over the gulf. But he did not fall; he rose, plunging into the depths of something invisible and soft, which hardened gradually into a great cushion, against which another cushion at his back urged him with ever-increasing force. Every atom of breath went from his lungs. He seemed about to be crushed. Then he slipped to the earth,

not like a falling body, but gently, like a drop of water slipping down a window-pane. The descent was of no great distance. He had been blown entirely across a chasm to a snow-crowned slope on the other side.

At the same time there came a sound which acted upon every tissue of his body; a sound which he could, so to speak, hear in his very marrow. His bones shook with the mighty vibration until it seemed as if their sockets must be pulverized. After this there succeeded a rain of boulders and smaller stones, promising every instant a speedy death. But at last the ungodly downpour ceased, and all that remained of the cataclysm was a thunderous peal which flung itself from peak to peak and died away finally in a grand diapason organ note among the farther hills.

But Purdy did not hear the end of this appalling symphony. One of the last and smallest stones, as it ricocheted after its descent, had struck him on the head.

CHAPTER X

NEW PUZZLES

WHEN he came to his senses his first impression was of darkness. It must be night, he thought. And yet that impenetrable pall overhead—a background of intense black faintly streaked with gray—certainly was not the sky. There was also a closeness in the air which bewildered him. The last he remembered he had been in some catastrophe, out of doors. And now he was in some stuffy, shut-up place.

Slowly he pieced his scattered memory together. There had been an explosion, and evidently he had been stunned. He didn't seem to have been hurt, but for a moment he was afraid to move lest he should find himself buried alive—caught in some crevice beneath a pile of splintered rock.

The more he stared into the blackness above him, however, the less total it became. A light was stealing in from somewhere; and as it gradually increased, the details of his surroundings revealed themselves. He was lying in a rough bunk. The pall of blackness was a roof; the gray streaks beams.

Perhaps he was back at Briggs's place. But no, as he turned his head he caught sight of an enormous room, as big as the best café in Lara's capital. It was fitted up as a machine-shop, with belts, pulleys, shafting. The sight was so astonishing that he closed his eyes again, thinking it must be an illusion. But he was not asleep, and his mind was perfectly clear. Had he been ill, and carried back to civilization? But they don't put sick men into bunks fastened to the walls of machine-shops. Nor could this be a stamp mill in some neighbouring mining camp. He had never heard of any such camp, and stamp mills do not have their

floors cluttered up with spool-like objects, twice the size of flour barrels, nor miles and miles of small, flexible, yellowish-gray rope festooned from the rafters.

He recalled the man with goggles, and moved cautiously, expecting every instant to feel the clutch of fetters. But his limbs were free; he might get up if he chose. But what if it was the man with goggles who had brought him there? In that case, he was free to rise because the man in goggles wanted him to rise. All things considered, it might be just as well to lie still.

Curiosity, however, finally got the better of this resolution, and with as little noise as possible he crept out of the bunk. He was fully dressed, he found, save for his boots, which were waiting for him. The bright morning sunshine, now streaming in through a row of windows, cast the long shadows of the boot-tops half way across the floor. He decided to do his first exploring in his stockinged feet, but his eyes instinctively

followed the shadows. There, where the shadows ended, about an open fireplace, were some chairs, a table, a bookcase, and a flat-topped desk. The table showed a half-opened drawer, and bending over it, with his back turned, stood a human figure.

Purdy, moving as stealthily as a cat, secured a stout iron bar from an extinct forge, shaped like the foundation of a chimney, that rose in his way, and crept forward. A scrap grated under his foot. The figure turned its head.

"What's the matter now?"

The bar clattered to the cement floor.

"Well, Tommy, you are always surprising me! I'm mighty glad it's you. Was it you who brought me to this place?"

"Yes; we heard an explosion—something awful, and went toward the sound. Briggs is somewhere about."

"Then all I've got to say is that Briggs, as well as you, is a mighty brave man." Purdy seated himself in a chair before the

desk in that incongruously domestic corner before the fireplace. It was beginning to be borne in upon him that Tommy was acting strangely.

"Where in heaven's name are we?" he went on. "What is this place?"

"We are up in the mountains still, but I don't know what it is. Only got here last night."

Tommy's reluctance to talk was now obvious. He seemed to be thinking of something quite apart from his words. Purdy turned to the desk before him. His glance fell aimlessly upon a thumb-worn volume which lay open at a passage bearing all the marks of frequent perusal. Slowly and at first almost automatically he translated from the foreign language in which it was printed:

"The body has a hand of flesh. Who shall give a hand to the will? Give me but the power which lies in the atoms of the dust, and I will write my name upon the

world in letters of steel and flame. Not the force to do this or that, but Force Itself."

On the margin was written in a large, irregular hand:

"What a fool the Kaiser was—he thought he had it."

And then, beneath:

"It is found—Force, itself! The secret of the atoms of the dust is mine. Already men are afraid. Their terror dangerous them makes. The butcher while he only whets his knife was almost under the feet of the sheep. Abroad it is over, they write me. One surrenders. Bah! Soon, above the mob, above presidents and kings, I, even I, Hans Krieg——"

The writing broke off.

"Krieg, eh? Sounds like a crazy man," said Purdy, aloud. "I don't know, though. Supposing the hand of the will *was* found? Only a crazy man——"

"Say, Tommy! What do you think of

this? Here's somebody who's trying to start up the Big Unpleasantness again. It's your friend, Krieg, too, or somebody else of the same name. He claims to have discovered a way of doing—not anything particular, but his own sweet will in general. He——”

But Tommy wasn't listening. He was swaying unsteadily on his feet, grinning fatuously; and while Purdy stared, slipped suddenly to the floor and began to babble almost incoherently.

“It was the spooky things that got me,” he said. “A machine-shop is all right. I can stand that. But *hair*—ugh! I couldn't bear to think about how it must have come here—not in cold blood. Honest, I couldn't.”

A bottle stood half empty on the table. Purdy snorted in disgust.

“Where'd you find it? Confound you, you're drunk again.”

“Shouldn't wonder. But thash better'n

going off my trolley. 'S where I *was* going, too."

The voice trailed off into silence. With surprising suddenness Tommy was asleep.

Purdy knelt down and lifted one of the heavy eyelids with a finger. The pupil was perceptibly shrunken. No, the wretched journalist was not drunk, but drugged.

"Morphia!" muttered Purdy. "That bottle—of course. The man who wrote in that book would naturally set out poisoned liquor."

But what had Tommy learned? What had he meant about hair? Certainly he had used the word—and there was a paper-wrapped parcel lying in the open drawer. Purdy shivered as he examined it, the vision of some nameless outrage creeping across his thoughts, for that parcel contained a tress of human hair cut off with prodigal liberality—hair rather straight, long, and bluish black, like jet.

And yet there was no need to imagine anything gruesome. It might be a solemn love-token cut from the head of the dead. Some women, even while living, might spare such a lock as that and look not a whit the worse. But the latter idea, at least, brought Purdy no satisfaction. The whole place had become utterly repugnant to him—a devil's workshop. He did not want to think of any woman being connected with it. Especially did a pump-like contrivance near the door, exhaling a faint odour—not of slime, this time, but of ammonia—excite his ire. Several frost-covered pipes extending from it suggested the ice-making plant in an up-to-date brewery. An evil brew it was which was being made here, there could be no doubt about that. No place for sentimental keepsakes and tresses of hair!

A squeaking sound arrested his attention. There was something alive in the midst of these mechanical contrivances. A short search revealed a wire hutch and several

hungry little guinea pigs. He quieted them with a handful of food from a near-by basket. But what were they here for? Vivisection? Some yet more accursed experiment? Yet somehow it did not matter. He was too sated with horrors to feel. The innocent little creatures in their snowy coats rather inclined him to smile. After all, nature's handiwork was wholesome and beautiful. He would try to forget man's.

Tommy was sleeping heavily, but required no particular attention. He would rest as comfortably before the fireplace, where there was a cheerfully blazing log, as he would anywhere else. Purdy went to the door he had already noticed, and tried it. He found it locked. But the door itself proved to be cut in an immense sliding panel, so delicately hung on rollers that it opened a little with the first touch.

He stepped out. The machine-shop seemed more absurdly impossible than ever. It was sheathed with corrugated iron.

A tall chimney rose at one corner. On the other side of large inclosed area were several workmen's cottages. None of them showed any signs of immediate occupancy. But this might have been in the suburbs of Paterson, New Jersey, or of Essen, for that matter. And yet, all around, in their unsullied majesty, rose that now-familiar wilderness of virgin peaks crowned with eternal snow.

But Purdy did not look long at the mountains. A gate clicked. Someone was entering the inclosure. Briggs, of course. That hunched figure with the bandaged arm and eager face was unmistakable. And with him there came—no mere lock of hair, this, but a woman.

CHAPTER XI

INTERRUPTED CONFIDENCE

THIS is—Mamzelle Marie, she calls herself,” said Briggs, advancing shamefacedly. “I found her dismissing her guides. She would come on, without a nag or anything, I had to bring her.”

He put down the bulging kit-bag he was carrying, and mopped his forehead. The woman, who was dressed in riding boots, khaki-coloured breeches, and an army officer's tunic, smiled ravishingly upon him. Then she dropped a curtsy in Purdy's direction, quite in the *grande dame* manner.

Marie would have been extraordinary anywhere. Though too generously framed to be termed exactly *petite*, she was unutterably feminine. A woman's hopes, fears, loves, and hates glowed mysteriously in the

dark depths of her wide and luminous eyes. Her attire, masculine as it was, failed to detract from her quality, and not even the boots were able to hide the instinctive grace of her movements.

But what was most surprising was the marble-like whiteness of her skin. With those eyes; with that hair, almost blue in the intensity of its blackness, her skin should have been olive. No doubt there had been some odd crossing of currents in her ancestry, something Andalusian, say, mixed with a strain from one of the Balkan provinces, something almost Oriental, perhaps just a trifle Jewish. But her pallor an unnatural quality. Purdy had seen the like in the victims of barbarous atrocities, bled white almost to the point of death. Even when a flush stole momentarily across her face it was as if the red tide rose with difficulty, and not quite to its original height.

Any woman would have astonished him.

This one added the final touch to the unbelievable, and he half expected to see the whole scene vanish from before his eyes. For it was undoubtedly she who had locked him in the Presidente's vacant guard room.

"Ziss iss charming, to meet up here—a gentleman!" she exclaimed, in mincing accents. And then, coming closer and speaking without moving her lips:

"Act as if you didn't recognize me, don't show surprise at anything, and watch for a chance to speak to me alone."

"Who are you, anyway?" Purdy was thrilled in spite of himself by the new and unexpected depths of those barely audible tones.

"A friend—if you'll try not to be deceived by appearances. But be careful. Nobody must see that we have met before."

"There is nobody here to see it excepting Briggs, and another gentleman whose acquaintance, I believe, you have already made."

They had reached the entrance of the machine-shop, and his tone was slightly ironical. He had suddenly remembered a murder case on Park Row which he had covered during his reporter days. Yes, it was certainly this same girl who had appeared there as the representative of some European welfare society or other. She might easily have been a spy, even then. And he had not forgotten their last meeting nor what had happened as the result of his taking her at her word on that occasion. It made him angry every time he thought of it. And here she was trying to be gracious, asking him not to judge by appearances. The very devil must have sent her.

"Yes, yes," she was saying; "it is that other one—but wait."

They entered. Tommy was sitting up, rubbing his eyes. At sight of Marie, he started, staring into her face as if petrified.

"Where—where is Mr. Krieg?" the

woman barely whispered, after a swift glance around.

"Oh! *that* gentleman! He is also an acquaintance?" asked Purdy. "We seem to have lost track of him for the moment."

"Gone? You have let him go? And he doesn't know that I am here. My God!"

She leaned back against the wall. A flush which had just begun to mantle her cheeks drained quickly away, leaving them as white as chalk, while her eyes dilated with pure fright. There could be no mistake whatever about the emotion. It was fear.

"Quick!" she went on. "We must get away—if there is yet time. When did he go?"

"That means you are anxious to get us away from place; why?" Purdy demanded, though there was no longer the same suspicion in his manner.

"Because we are all in very great danger while we stay."

"You think he might come and find us?"

"Then, truly, he does not know you are here?"

Her relief seemed genuine, but Purdy felt his doubts returning. His profession had taught him that eternal distrust is very often the price of liberty, and even of life itself. Distrust did not come naturally. Especially was it hard for him to believe that a young and beautiful woman, under a cloak of marvellous acting, had deliberately tried to stampede him into an ambush; and seeing that he didn't stampede, was now endeavouring to hide her defeat—under more acting still. It would be hard for any man with good warm blood in his veins to believe. At the same time not to be cautious would be idiotic.

"I don't *think* he knows we are here," Purdy ventured. "Indeed, I am not positive that a certain person I have in mind is really he. But before I answer any more questions, isn't it time you told me who you are?"

"I am Mary Kocian."

"I mean, of course, *what* you are, and what you are expecting to find up here?"

"That—I hardly know, myself." A fathomless look came and went in the depths of her eyes. "But where *is* Mr. Krieg—or the person you are not quite certain is he or not? You—you haven't killed him?"

Again there was some flicker of hidden emotion, and—no; it was not hope.

Purdy shook his head, more disturbed than he would have cared to confess. Then the feeling passed. After all, was it unnatural to find a young woman shrinking somewhat from the idea of violence? True, she did not look like one who would shrink from anything, if the pinch came. But it was absurd to expect her to hate this absent monster. Why, he was only just beginning to realize that he hated him himself.

"I fancy he is rather hard to kill," Purdy went on, "while we would be rather easy——"

"For him, yes. He has invented something—maybe you know what."

"Do you?"

"Not in detail. But if he once sees you——"

"He has seen me already if he is that big fat toad with weak eyes——"

"That is he! If you succeed in rejoining him, never let him out of your sight again. Follow him wherever he goes. Will you try to remember that? I've taken considerable trouble to warn you."

Was it a woman's dread of violence which was moving her once more? Hardly. It looked more like a genuine friendly interest.

"See here," said Purdy, suddenly, "there is something which I have often thought about, though I have never mentioned it before. Somebody translated a cipher message for Presidente Lara a short time ago. It just occurs to me that it might have been you."

"How could it have been I?"

"You might be one of *us*, and have the key."

"And have used it as a traitor?"

All this time they had been standing, she with her back to an open window, he facing her. Purdy now moved to her side, and pretended to be looking out at the hills. His voice was scarcely distinguishable above the wind—almost miraculously mild for that altitude—which murmured in the nearest tree-tops.

"Why not a traitor? Such things have been. You were very close to Lara. Maybe you were sent to watch him—and double-crossed us. And then, after you had been forced to lure me into a trap, perhaps you relented. What was to have happened may have been—too unpleasant, let us say. So—somebody—wrote a note which let me out. It all seems to hang rather well together."

"And what if I should confess that you are right?"

"Then I would be inclined to believe that some very strong pressure had been brought to bear."

"You would be inclined to excuse me?"

"You might have been compelled, by some motive I know nothing about."

He felt the intensity of her look, and turned to meet it. She seemed to be studying him.

"Isn't it just possible," she said, "that Lara was the one I double-crossed, if I double-crossed anybody?"

"Those who are deep enough in the Service to be allowed to play that game," observed Purdy, slowly, "have a way of telling each other. There is a password."

The girl neither flinched nor changed countenance. But her lips remained sealed. Then slowly she began to smile, showing two rows of large, flashing white teeth of a wonderful translucency.

"If you want my confidence, Mademoiselle Marie Kocian, you are not going about in the right way to get it."

"Who said I wanted it? Perhaps I don't—too much of it. That might be the most unfortunate thing of all." She looked away, and spoke as if to herself: "And yet, at least you might take my advice—that is, assuming that Mr. Krieg is still alive."

"I said I hadn't killed him."

"But you didn't say he wasn't dead. Mr. Briggs was telling me about the explosion. Besides, I heard it."

"Nevertheless, it's safe to assume that he is alive, I think."

"Then find him, and keep near him."

"That is rather strange advice. It might be only another way of getting us out of here."

"But—can't you see? If you are with him you can deal with him as you would with any man. While he is away you can't."

"Exactly what is likely to happen if he finds out we are here?"

"I can't tell you—exactly. If he once

arrives, nothing. Perhaps if you are sure he didn't follow you at a distance, we'd better stay. I can fix myself a place in one of the cottages. They are empty, aren't they?"

"Yes; but don't you think you've adopted a rather unconventional way of travelling?"

"Shockingly so. Chaperones are rather scarce in my line of business."

"What is your line?"

A flash of hatred, as if she had seen a feared and detested object, passed before her inner vision; of hatred and despair, such as he had never in his life dreamed of, transformed the woman's features for an instant. Then she relaxed.

"I am the Queen of Sheba, come to life and looking for a Solomon."

"You look it—now—I must confess," he assented, joining in her laugh.

Whatever might be the power exercised by the absent Krieg, it was evident that Marie had a power of her own, and possibly

even more subtle and dangerous. Irresistibly, against his will, the conversation had turned into the eternal path which runs between man and woman. They might have been starting out to keep a dinner engagement on Broadway for all the hostility there was now in their manner.

This insidious friendliness was even more apparent when they joined the others, found a stock of provisions, and sat down all together to a mid-morning meal. Briggs was already a maudlin captive, and Tommy, as soon as he had recovered from the final effects of the drug, went over unreservedly to Marie's side.

"I suppose she's just about the worst difficulty we've run into yet," he whispered to Purdy, while Marie went to reheat the coffee by the open fire. "But I don't care. I'm *for* her. Did you ever see such a stunner in your life? And maybe she's all right."

"Maybe she is, and—oh, hang it all! I'm with you. Let's have a jolly party.

We don't live but once, and it won't make the next encounter with battle, murder, and sudden death any more uncomfortable."

And a jolly party it was, Marie's foreign qualities disappearing more and more every minute beneath an easy, American good-fellowship. And jolly it remained until Briggs, his eyes wandering in curiosity about the shop, chanced to discover a solitary cap hanging upon a nail—so conspicuously that he had at first overlooked it. An ordinary cap it was, of a dirty, well-worn blue. But its effect on the miner was startling. He leaped up, rushed forward to examine it, and turned back to the table with a face from which all expression had completely gone.

"Weisner!" he was mumbling. "Do you see the name Weisner here inside the sweat-leather? Weisner was my partner. This here cap is hisen. And he's been missin' for three months."

A chill descended upon Purdy's spirit.

Had or had not Marie started at the name Weisner? And anyway, there is always an uncomfortable sound to that word "missing"; and the sight of something belonging to a missing person never suggests pleasant things. A more careful examination of the whole place was undoubtedly in order.

But they found nothing new to attract their attention until they came to that pump-like contrivance near the door. The frost-covered pipes proved, on closer examination, to go down through the floor. In the floor also was a large steel plate set flush with the cement surface and rendered almost indistinguishable from it by a thin coating of dust. The plate was fitted with a sunken ring, and lifted without difficulty upon hidden hinges, revealing the top of a small round tank nearly filled with something having a dark, burnished surface. Turdy stooped down. In the semi-transparency of its depths there were long, wisp-like filaments of green. Filaments of

green, as in the pool at the cave! And they had been making merry within three yards of it.

At the same instant he saw something fall from Briggs's hand.

Since coming upon the cap, the miner had gone about with his pocket-knife open and ready as if for an immediate attack. But on looking down into the tank his whole body began to tremble violently, making it plain that another mystery was really more than he could bear. And now the knife slipped from his fingers and plunged straight for that malignantly glittering, green-treaked surface.

Purdy watched it fall as one might watch the approaching end of the world. Ages seemed to elapse, though there was not time for him to move a muscle. He remembered what had happened at the cave, and already he could feel the machine-shop and all in it and around it simply disintegrating into their original elements.

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The knife struck. There was a tinkle, as of metal against metal. That was all. The surface of the tank's contents was not even dented. Solid! And he had thought that it was a liquid. Surely this same substance had been a liquid in the cave. He had seen tiny ripples. Perhaps it was frozen. That was it—frozen by the ice-machine. Danger lay not in a blow or jar but in fire.

"I think it's all right," he said, motioning the others back and carefully closing the trap. "But I hope there's no electric wire concealed in that stuff."

"Do you suppose it's explosive?" asked Tommy.

"Rather!"

"That isn't what got loose up in the hills yesterday, you don't mean?"

Purdy nodded, but his eyes were fixed upon Marie. Her warning against the machine-shop as a place of residence seemed to be justified.

"No, it isn't that," she answered to

his gaze, "it isn't an explosive—the thing we're looking for. At least, I don't think so."

"Neither do I," agreed Purdy, remaining beside her while the others went back to the table. "Though after all, what is an explosive but a sudden release of force? We're not looking for a new kind of artillery, or anything like that, I am certain. But an explosive—it might be one of the forms which it takes—the thing, whatever it is. Did you ever stop to think what would happen if a man could overcome material resistance absolutely in every direction and quite at his will? Why, just to move faster, just to be a little stronger than anything now existing would make him practically omnipotent."

He had forgotten his suspicions. Were they not comrades in danger?

"I have a plan," she suddenly broke out. "If I tell you—if we work together—do you think you could hide the fact

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from everybody and under all circumstances?"

"Try me," said Purdy.

As he spoke, the door opened. There stood the man with goggles.

CHAPTER XII

A CRISIS

THE goggles were thrust back upon his forehead now, revealing a pair of small blue eyes—the most repulsive eyes that Purdy had ever seen. They looked like pig's eyes rendered pale and weak from much reading. The rest of the man more resembled a blond, hairless gorilla grown fat from want of physical exercise. It was this incongruous combination—the beast sicklied o'er with the pale cast of schoolmaster—which made him so monstrous. For what would not a beast turned schoolmaster be capable of?

Purdy's first, instinctive movement was toward Marie. His impulse was to protect her from even a sight of this intruder. But she evaded him, and with a cry ringing

with relief and joy threw herself literally into the intruder's arms. Yes, she, the friendly Queen of Sheba of their feast!

Purdy shivered, and cursed himself for his simplicity. Here he had been on the point of collaborating with her on some plan—something designed, perhaps, with the sole idea of destroying him. This interruption was providential. And he cursed himself again for the twinge so much like jealousy which shot through him as he saw the brutal kiss which descended time and time again upon her full, unflinching lips.

"You haf *come* to me!" gloated that guttural voice.

"But yes! And look who I have found here. Messieurs, you have met Mr. Krieg, my husband?"

Her husband! And Krieg—the man of the *casa*, of the mountains, of the book of blasphemies against sound reason—they were one, sure enough. Marie had addressed him in her natural voice as one who

knew her in her true character; but she began to mince her words when she turned to the others, and the glance which she cast in Purdy's direction was altogether mocking. Well, didn't such stupidity as his deserve all the ridicule it could get? He should have recognized that hair at once; so black, and yet with a sub-tint that was only a dark, dark blue, as of steel.

Krieg looked up and seemed to see them for the first time.

"My people?" he cried. "*Nein!* Some pigs."

He went over to the hutch which Purdy had already investigated, took one of the guinea pigs, dropped it to the floor, and wantonly ground out its life beneath his heel. There was a gasp of horror from three men. But the outrage was over before they could stir. Marie merely smiled.

"This is a *liddle* pig," Krieg continued, with a bellow of a laugh. "I haf also a nice reception ready for der big ones. It is only

necessary that we leave them alone. Come! I take you with me."

Here threatened the very situation which Marie had warned against. Was it certain to prove desirable just because of that? To be left alone, and Krieg knowing where they were—Purdy did not like the idea. But he could do nothing. He had left his automatic at the cave. Briggs was not only wounded but practically unarmed, or he would never have drawn a mere knife when frightened by the finding of the cap. As for Tommy—but why speculate? There was no chance for a word with Tommy. And even should Tommy attempt to draw of his own notion the probabilities were all against success. Krieg's little eyes had in them a look of watchfulness, and his movements that sly rapidity not infrequently met with in men whose superfluous flesh has a substantial foundation in bone and muscle. No; Purdy could do nothing, not even if he were certain what he wanted to do.

But Marie was endeavouring to keep Krieg there. No doubt of that. Her Hans, she insisted, was tired and hungry. He must eat and rest. Also he was fearfully cut and bruised. His hurts must be attended to. What was she up to? Had she really a woman's natural horror of murder (and who knew how dreadful might be the form of that which impended?) when it applied to human beings and not guinea pigs? Or was there something, after all, in that *plan* which she had pretended to have thought of? A plan which must be hidden from everybody and under all circumstances, she had said.

It would not do to go too far in distrust any more than in confidence. He must watch and wait. Certainly the way she clung to that room seemed to have method in it. It was as though her soul's salvation depended on her presence there. Nothing could have exceeded the ingenuity with which she put off the hour of leaving.

Krieg's wounds and bruises were bathed and bandaged with a care and tenderness that concealed an enormous amount of slowness. Then she engaged him in a long-whispered conversation, which brought at first a look of ferocious cunning to his face, and later a fatuous expression, like that of a king who had just heard of tardy but to-be-expected homage proffered him by some rebellious tribe. From the way in which he shook his head it seemed evident that the tribe was to be punished nevertheless; but the fat gorilla was pleased.

Purdy, waiting breathlessly for some moment when his enemy should be definitely off guard, for some opportunity to get the upper hand, rested his foot with elaborately feigned negligence against the base of one of the open-work, structural-iron supports which held up the centre of the roof. Instantly he was aware that he stood at the base not of a support only but of a ladder. The goggled man seemed to deal in ladders.

Or were these regularly spaced crosspieces but the accidental result of structure?

The question interested him, and took his mind for an instant from the general situation. Then a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder and jerked him several paces to the rear.

"Keep away from dod!" Krieg was fuming, and gesticulating in his face. "I vill haf no climbing about, no monkey tricks."

Purdy said nothing, but at the first opportunity he glanced aloft, and saw just under the rafters something which looked like an electric circuit-breaker. He had felt Krieg's fingers creeping over his person, looking for weapons, and now he saw him searching Briggs, disarming Tommy. Something had evidently aroused his sense of caution. Had the circuit-breaker anything to do with it?

Purdy glanced at Marie, who was beginning to prepare another meal. A look like despair rested for a moment on her face.

That plan of hers! Was it real? Had it miscarried somehow—and just at this particular instant? But no. It was not despair, it was resolution which he saw. His eyes had deceived him. Painful, agonized resolution, perhaps; but still resolution, determined, immovable. And by the time that Krieg was ready to partake of the food which she set before him with all the anxious solicitude in the world, she had become wholly the devoted slave, every thought apparently absorbed in the task of serving her lord.

“She says you know something of my power—my plans—my glorious future,” said Krieg at last, emptying his mouth to address Purdy. “Iss it so? You would like to join to the great revolution which I make against this foolish idea of der people rules?”

“I came to fight you,” said Purdy, quietly. He had been trying to grasp fully in all its ramifications a vague idea suggested by the

circuit-breaker, and this sudden summons to reality was something of a shock.

"But I am beginning to see that resistance is useless," he went on. "Yes, we would like to help you."

Tommy gave a start. Krieg, who had never yet for more than a moment stationed himself so that he could not see everybody in the room, appeared to take no notice, but stood up and began to speak like a soap-box orator.

"I do not need help. Power iss in mein hand. But I may need der lieutenants. And if none of my work is to waste here, I need der labourers. You make three strong men. If I use you it iss like gifting you your lives. Do you see dod iss so, or do you want——"

"We have seen enough!" interrupted Purdy in a tone which would pass as admiring. "Tell us what to do, and we will do it. Afterward you can reward us as you think fit."

"Goot!" cried Krieg, clapping his hands. "You put yourselves on the side of der strong. My servants! I let you lif!"

Could it be possible that the creature had been duped? That he would reveal his secret if they merely humoured him for awhile? Credulous, bombastic stupidity fairly dripped from his heavy jaws. Had that look of crafty intelligence been a mask, hiding the soul of a fool? But no! The fellow was doubtless a little mad. A disquieting gleam was never absent from his eyes. Only the iris was pale. Within the pupil there was a flame. And neither as fool nor savant could he ever be trusted.

Work began at once, without further promise and with but little explanation. Krieg turned certain valves and moved a lever. The low hum of an electric motor was heard; the pistons of the pump began to move.

"Power now iss coming from a waterfall," Krieg did condescend to remark. "Der

work mit boiler and engines iss finished. You need not be afraid—not yet.”

From time to time came a sharp hiss, as of escaping gas, and there was an ever-increasing odour of ammonia. Purdy, although he had rather shirked lab. at college, knew what to expect even before a stream of clear, sparkling, colourless liquid started trickling into a receptacle from a faucet. The “pump” was a compressor. Certain compressed gases, when released, produce intense cold. And cold and pressure together will liquefy any substance known. The trickle was liquid air.

Other levers were moved. The pistons came to rest, and a few seconds later the ice began slowly to melt from about the lower ends of the pump-pipes, just where they disappeared into the floor. Purdy wondered now if he had done well to trust himself and his companions to an enterprise involving the use of such machinery. Evidently it could blow hot as well as cold.

Yet Krieg's presence promised safety, for the time being at least. He might have a liking for homicide. But suicide, now that one had a good look at him, did not seem to be at all the sort of a thing likely to engage his attention.

Length after length of the festooned cord—which proved to be of some soft, absorbent material, smoothly braided about a fine wire to give it strength—was taken down from the rafters. The spool-like objects, heretofore of no apparent usefulness, now revealed themselves as spools indeed. They were light metal cylinders, some foot or more in diameter and about three feet in length, with a wide flange about the edges and with hollow cores. These cores fitted over the square-cornered, projecting shaft of a power winch, and when the spools were mounted, one after another, upon the winch, they could be made to revolve at will. To wind them with the braided rope was like winding huge bobbins, and after a dozen of

them had been thus filled they looked quite ready to furnish satan's sewing-machine with appropriate thread.

Purdy noticed that the winch projected just over one of the edges of the hidden tank, and that there was another one like it, fitted with an empty spool, over the opposite edge. So, when the last spool had been wound and left in place, and the end of its rope attached to a tiny hook on the flange of the empty one, the rope passed directly above the centre of the tank. He began to get an inkling of what was going to be done.

Krieg ordered the fire on the hearth extinguished, and then himself carefully inspected the embers for sparks, though a pail of water had been poured over them.

"Now listen," he said. "Everyone his matches over here in this table drawer put, where I will lock them up. One of you might forget und start to schmoke. Be careful how you walk. A spark from a boot-heel, it might do no harm, or it might

—*mein Gott!* I must take time und perfect this brocess. Not much danger at ordinary demperatures, *aber* it iss crude yet. I go up to show you a liddle substance I call 'novalite.' Do eferything slowly. We haf blenty of time."

He lifted the iron floor-plate on its hinges, but his hand shook and his face was pasty. Purdy felt a sudden admiration for this lubberly creature whose very cowardice gave to his conduct a sort of heroism. It is something to have cowardice—and yet defy it. For years he must have lived hand in hand with death.

The substance was now liquid, for when the full spool began to unwind, the slack cord sank slowly beneath the surface. After some minutes, during which almost the entire contents of the spool disappeared, Krieg set the opposite spool in motion so slowly that the coated rope—now swollen to about the size of a lead pencil and of a glossy, greenish tint—was quite dry when

it settled into place on the growing coil. Now and then a drop of novalite would indeed trickle back into the tank, but it was never from any great distance above it, and by the expression of Krieg's face it was evident that all was going well.

The operation continued with scarcely a word being spoken. As a spool was emptied of honest fibre, it would be shifted to the other winch and refilled with fibre transformed by the simple process of dipping, or trailing through the tank—transformed into that sinister, snake-like thing into which had somehow crept the soul of Krieg's invention. The loaded spool would then be slipped into a tight cylinder of thin steel having a screw cover. Into each cylinder also went a quantity of liquid air.

About midnight the work was done. Krieg re-froze what remained of the novalite in the tank, and lowered the floor-plate into place. All was ready—for what? It was impossible even to guess.

"Let us rest," he panted, flinging himself down on the floor near the fireplace and motioning the others to do the like.

Marie, who had assisted at the preparations (and had somehow managed to hinder rather than help), came forward and lighted his pipe. Then she rebuilt the fire, found a chair for Krieg's better comfort, and curled herself Turkish fashion at his feet.

He began to talk.

At first it was good talk—about himself, his youth, his studies, his employment by his native government in scientific researches, his removal to South America, and the beginning of the war. He had stolen his first idea, he openly boasted, from a Frenchman, and then his experiments had begun to promise something so prodigious that the authorities hurried him into the wilderness. The secret must be hidden—and it was a secret difficult to hide. Having begun by frightening the natives intentionally with a few simple tricks, he had later

found himself interfered with and nearly destroyed by fear-maddened mobs. Since then he had set death-traps everywhere—like that one in the cave which had come so near to catching him and Purdy together.

It was only late in his investigations into the nature of force that he began to appreciate to the full the possibilities that lay within his reach. And when he did, he thought, why give them up to a Kaiser? To a War Board? Why give them up at all?

“It was too simble!” he cried, excitement and pride once more bringing him to his feet. “My force can be condrolled by heat and cold. Condrolled by one man as well as a million. I decide to be Kaiser—more than Kaiser—myself.”

And then came the armistice, the Central Powers on their knees; and he with his secret undivulged save in a few official reports, totally inadequate and far from up-to-date.

"They go to surrender!" Krieg shouted, as if his little audience were an applauding multitude. "They talk about a rule by der peobles. Und I—I, Hans Krieg, that men have spit upon, I am here alreaty to be master of all. To-morrow efening we start—in New York!"

"In New York?" Purdy involuntarily echoed.

"*Ja!* There I did not pay them their damn moneys. They turn me out into der street. They die that do it—and many more. Die! Die! Die!"

Krieg could speak calmly of world-conquest, but the thought of private revenge went to his head.

Purdy stirred uneasily. Not only this but the whole thing was so preposterous. Here, while the world was almost delirious in its first joy over returning peace, was a madman already hard at work to bring back the discredited reign of frightfulness. And he was certainly not altogether un-

equipped for the task. The New York trip might take a little longer than he claimed, but that he had an unexplained and highly efficient way of killing people was beyond a doubt. It must not be! He must be stopped—now, before any more lives were lost. God! The world had given up its best already. Had not Verdun, the Marne, Picardy satisfied even hell with human sacrifices?

Tommy, seated in the chimney corner half behind Krieg's back, tapped significantly on his forehead. Purdy nodded. But he had already ceased thinking directly of Krieg and his grandiose schemes. He was thinking of Marie. It was not only the world at large, not only a few ungrateful merchants and landlords in New York over which this fellow sought power. Anyway, big schemes can generally be depended upon to break down under their own weight. It was the power which 'was already being exercised over this young woman that was

beginning to take first place in Purdy's imagination. She might be—probably was, in spite of all his vague hope to the contrary—his own most deadly enemy. But her enmity was more and more clearly involuntary; the evidence that she was under some unspeakable sort of duress, though subtle, was becoming certain.

"Her plan! Her plan! What was it?" Purdy's racked brain kept shouting within him.

Krieg had dropped his wild harangue and was talking to the girl in a manner more absurdly sentimental than threatening, but there were signs of the awakening of a more primitive passion.

Purdy rose and took a step, seemingly aimless but in the direction of the roof support. Krieg did not appear to notice. He took another. Krieg was saying:

"We haf spent time here enough. These stupid fellows serf me only for their lifes. They do not see how the whole worlt is to

come to my feet. We now go und make ready a place for you in the cottage I haf selected."

Marie offered no objection. She let him put an arm around her, and soon they were both on their feet and moving toward the door. But just as she was about to cross the threshold she shot Purdy a glance so sudden and intense that it was obviously involuntary, the last backward glance of a doomed soul that has not yet reached hades but finds itself upon the brink.

Her plan! But what did it matter? Too clearly the time for it had passed. Perhaps it had fallen through with the seizing of Tommy's revolver. Purdy had ceased to think of it. With the turning of Krieg's back he had reached the foot of the roof-support. In another instant he was half-way up to the circuit-breaker, shouting at the top of his voice:

"Stop where you are, you swine! Not another step. Not another step on your life!"

Krieg spun on his heel, and showed a ghastly face distorted by sudden fright. Purdy's hand was already on the circuit-breaker. If he were shot he would undoubtedly close the connection as he fell.

"*Gott in Himmel!* Don't you know what you do? There iss enough yet of novalite in der tank to blow us all und for miles around into adoms. Don't touch that switch. There iss a wire—it turns on one great blast of heat. In a minute nodding could safe us!"

So, it was true, the vague idea which had moved Purdy to strike almost at random. Like so many other deranged geniuses, Krieg had prepared a final, grandstand exit from the world if ever he should be pressed to the last extremity. No matter now if Marie had never had a plan. Purdy had one, and he rather thought it would not only improve the present situation, which was as far as possible from his liking, but enable

him to discover Krieg's secret and maybe live to tell the tale.

"Nothing can save us in a whole lot less than a minute—and you know it!" he declared. "If you don't come back and take a few orders now from me, I'll send you and the girl and all the rest of us into kingdom come. If it's a case of dying, I'd rather go this way than trust myself in any more of your traps."

Krieg assented to this call to parley with that alacrity which has made the word *Kamarad* a byword.

And Marie? She said nothing, and her eyes were fathomless. Purdy, after ordering Krieg disarmed, came down from his strategic position for a closer view. But the eyes remained inscrutable. He could read nothing in their opaque depths—nothing whatever.

CHAPTER XIII

THE THING

TOMMY was quite jubilant as he assisted in searching Krieg and tying him securely to a chair.

"An ounce of cold lead out of his own gun is what he deserves. But I guess if we pack him back with us to the little old capital, the reign of terror in these parts will be about due to collapse."

"Pack him with us and turn him over to —Lara?" inquired Purdy, standing so that no one, not even Marie, could get between him and his aerial post.

Tommy's face fell.

"That's so. I'd forgotten that old Spaniard. We ought to kill him, then. It's rotten to do for a man in cold blood, but I for one am game for leaving him here to die."

"Oh, no, you're not, Tommy! And you are forgetting another thing. We didn't come here to kill him, but to find out something."

"What is it you want?" put in Krieg.

"We want you to go ahead with your scheme," Purdy answered. "Count us in on it—until we reach civilization. After that, I warn you, it is every man for himself."

"*Wohl!* That is vot I was going to do. But we will haf first to make a long tramp. A woman could hardly do it."

"I don't believe it's so very long. But there is no need for her to do it."

"Goot! You come with me. She wait here for us."

"No; she will wait here, and so will the rest of us—for you."

"You'll let me go alone?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to trust the brute, you don't mean?" gasped Tommy, incredulous.

"I'm going to let him go, if that's trusting

him. Hurry up! Untie him. We've wasted time enough."

"But, Mr. Purty," put in the hitherto silent Briggs, "what hold have we got over the critter if we let him slip his halter? But maybe I didn't hear straight. I'm a little deaf."

"You heard all right. We'll have our hostage, that'll be hold enough. He's no more anxious to slaughter the young lady than we are. Did you ever hear of Achilles' heel?"

Purdy spoke confidently. He had found, he believed, the vulnerable spot where Krieg was played upon by a force much older than his boasted Right Hand of the Will; and he meant to take full advantage of it, though there was no denying that it went against the grain.

Tommy reluctantly cut the bonds which he and Briggs had tied with such satisfaction only a few moments before. Krieg stood up.

"It iss a pargain," he announced, with a relieved grin. "You are right to dake pregautions. But we shall be friends. I make you great men. Do not be afraid."

He tried to take a step toward Marie, but Tommy put himself in the way. Nothing was in the way of her smile, however. Purdy, forced to keep guard over everything, saw the smile and the look of sinister intelligence with which Krieg answered. He had been prepared for some such manifestation. If she were playing a part with Krieg, the smile was an almost indispensable bit of stage business. But why should she keep up a part now that Krieg was powerless?

"I am a fool!" Purdy said to himself. "Of course he is in our power only because he thinks she is on his side. Otherwise he could plan to kill us all together with—whatever it is that he uses for wholesale work."

And yet he disliked that smile more than

he had disliked anything since coming into the mountains. It made his blood heat furiously. How glad he was when Krieg finally went. Now, at last, there would be a chance for explanations.

But none were forthcoming. Marie pleaded a headache, and withdrew herself to a corner of the fire, quite in the manner of a spoiled child. It was ridiculous. Was this a parlour? Were they to be treated in a matter of life and death as if they were a lot of dancing-men quarrelling over a waltz with the belle of the evening? Purdy walked resolutely to Marie's side and sat down.

"Now," said he, "let's put all our cards on the table."

"*Zie table, ett iss la bas*—over yonder," she responded, relapsing into her mincing speech.

"I think I've done enough for you now to warrant your dropping all this nonsense." He controlled his temper with diffi-

culty. She tossed her head and shrugged her shoulders in a manner evidently meant to be as nearly insulting as her assumption of French politeness permitted.

"Oh, if you are going to remind me of all you have *done* for me, m'sieu!"

"No, I am not going to remind you of that—at least never again. And if you are afraid to show your hand I'll begin by showing mine. I am an agent of the Secret Service of the United States, and I still rather think it possible that *you* are. At least you are on the same side with us in investigating a matter, which, if it doesn't concern the peace of the world, at least involves the life of a great many people. You are married, you say, to this man Krieg. I can see myself that you have got him under your thumb. A very clever piece of work.

"And yet you detest him and all his doings. That is what I am banking on. You have been playing him as a necessary pawn

in your game. And I am here to relieve you of that particular detail. To tell the truth, clever as it is I don't like to see it. Such things are hard for an American to stomach. You may have to pretend to like him for a while yet—while we're giving him line and making him show us what he is up to. But I've got the upper hand of him now, and I think I can keep it without a great deal of help. It will be merely a matter of seeing to it that all the weapons are in the right pockets. But I want to understand your plans. We can't work together in the dark."

Marie had listened with every sign of growing impatience. Now she leaped up and stamped her foot in the conventional tragedienne manner.

"Do you think that men like you can get the upper hand of Hans Krieg?" she demanded, speaking at last in her own resonant voice. "Do you think that a woman, with such a choice offered her, would take

sides with—you?" She burst into contemptuous laughter. "Why, he holds you in the hollow of his hand. And if he spares you in the end it will only be because he is great and good and you are too insignificant for him to stoop to punish. Men like you can't appreciate greatness when you see it. You have no minds, no imagination. Leave me alone. Don't come near me."

"I don't know but what that's a little too much overdone to be convincing," Purdy observed, by no means certain that it was not all an evil dream.

"Overdone? I *hate* you!"

There was no mistaking the cat-like fury of the aspirate, nor the sudden stir of masculine indignation which it awakened.

"Very well, Miss Spitfire. I don't pretend to make you out. But if that's the way you feel you will please hand over the little revolver I'm sure you're hiding somewhere about that male attire of yours."

Marie fought; she screamed; she even

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used her teeth. Tommy and Briggs interfered on her behalf, and Purdy found himself confronted not only by hysteria but by insubordination. Yet he insisted upon his point, and finally carried it.

"You will be sorry—we shall all be sorry. I don't blame you, but I don't know what to do!" said the enigmatical girl, all at once becoming quiet and offering Purdy a small, elegant, but still very business-like weapon which she had concealed, woman-fashion, in the bosom of her blouse.

"I hate to leave you unarmed," he confessed, in some embarrassment. "But what can I do after what you have told me?"

There was no answer. Tommy and Briggs went back to their places. Purdy finally went on in a tone which only she could hear:

"If there comes an emergency do you really want me to leave you alone?"

"No!" She looked him full in the face. Then her eyes fell. "Do not let us separate. Do not let me out of your sight what-

ever happens. Give me your word—as a gentleman.”

With that her demeanour altered. She sank back into her chair, and covered her face with her hands.

“Oh, what am I saying! I—I am not as strong as I thought. You must pay no attention to me. Only if you do leave me alone, will you—will you give me back my revolver?”

Her eyes were lifted again. There was not a trace of irony in her voice, and her words had all the ring of melancholy sincerity. Purdy bowed and sat down by himself to think.

Whatever might be the motive of Marie's conduct (and, that plea for the revolver was certainly open to suspicion) it was clearly not her intention that he should either trust her or distrust her altogether. She *wanted* him to work in the dark. Why? That was the problem which he set himself to solve. And the solution would not come.

It was clear that she was not a mere operative like himself. She was more like a fanatic, whose motives were more involved, deeper, and more personal. Like a leaf, she was being blown along by the invisible—that is to say, the irresistible—but always toward her hidden goal. Nothing would stop her; he saw that. And, if it came to the pinch, she would stop at nothing. Regarding her attentively, he could not help thinking of pictures he had seen of Charlotte Corday upon the trail of Marat, of Jael standing by the tent with Sisera. Whose and what wrongs were urging her? Into exactly what counter-purpose was she seeking to drive the dagger or the nail? It looked like vengeance, but was it certain that it was vengeance against Krieg that she was seeking? Obviously not. She might just as well be after vengeance against some enemy of his. To none of these questions was there a definite answer.

The night slipped away, and Krieg did

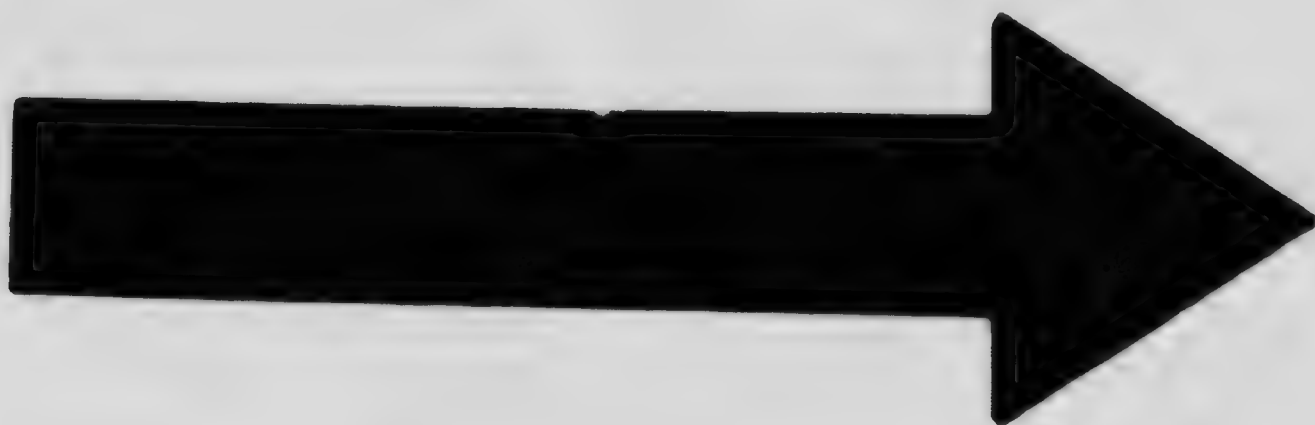
not return. Purdy, unconscious of having slept, sat up suddenly. A ghostly dawn crept in at the windows. The others also were stirring, as if they, too, had been disturbed. Moved by a common impulse, they made their way to the door.

"I don't know why, but I feel as if the bottom were going to drop out of things," began Tommy in little better than a whimper in Purdy's ear. "I was having an awful dream, and all at once——"

It did not need Purdy's clutch upon his elbow to stop him. Though it was still an hour to sunrise, the zenith had suddenly blazed as at mid-day, and an appalling, green-tinted sun—or, to describe the appearance more accurately, a comet, a whirl of fire—swept overhead. The air filled with a screaming noise, like the cry of a million sentient but inarticulate creatures in agony, and a huge object, vague and dark, could be seen rushing ahead of the flames as if trying to escape.

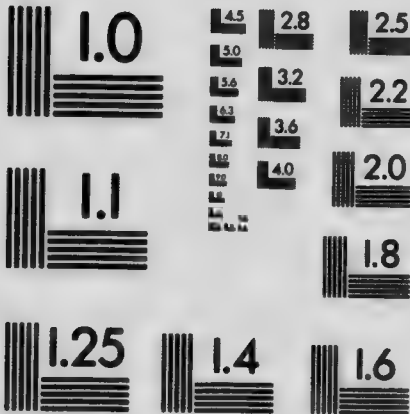
It was dark for an instant after the apparition had passed. And then a single point of light was seen to glow in mid-zenith, as if a lantern had been lit and hung high up beneath the tent of the sky. Soon, however, the lantern changed. It became to all appearance a mass of molten metal, increasing in bulk and spreading in every direction with the frightful rapidity of the Essence of Evil itself let loose. In a few seconds it covered the entire sky with a dazzling, unbearable sheet of flame.

And then abruptly an irregular black hole appeared in its centre. Not that, either. It was something having substance of its own, opaque or nearly so. It, too, assumed enormous proportions, until it was like an enormous pall, the edges of which hurled themselves toward the cardinal points where the four horizons were held on high by the mountains. Midnight returned while something that was not so much a sound as the stir of the very atoms of the



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universe shook the earth as though the earth were a piece of jelly.

The shock all but crushed the onlookers to the ground. When they had recovered sufficiently to again look up, the heavens had cleared. Faint stars twinkled from the sky.

"What are we going to do now?" chattered Tommy, choking with the poisonous gas with which the air was filled.

"We must wait for Krieg," said Purdy. "After all, nothing has happened, but——"

He broke off. Coming toward them, his goggles swinging in his hand, an unconcerned smile on his face, was Krieg himself. And behind him they saw something which immediately took their attention from all other matters.

CHAPTER XIV

GOOD-BYE, EARTH

IT WAS an object about fifty feet long and eight or ten feet high, shaped somewhat like a fish and having what looked like a row of eyes all along its side. It was covered with scales, too—heavy, overlapping plates, apparently of steel, green with damp fungus and coated in places with mud and aquatic plants. To complete its resemblance to a living thing, a soft purring note, like that of a hive of bees getting ready to swarm, came continuously from within.

Krieg offered no objections when Purdy, with Tommy at his heels, started forward for a nearer view.

“It’s only some new kind of armoured tank,” said Tommy, thrusting his head

through a large square opening that yawned in the rear. "Rather nifty inside. Looks like a cabin on board a yacht. But it doesn't account for things."

Purdy, who was looking where the head tapered to a sharp, horizontal edge—a protruding lip as formidable as it was ugly—gravely dissented.

"Not *only* a tank, Tommy. In my opinion it accounts for everything. See, it's been under water, hidden at the bottom of the lake most likely. Remember those unaccountable waves? And look what's printed here on the bow."

"*Scorpion*," read Tommy. "Pretty name! But I don't see how she could have smashed those trees, let alone scorching them. There doesn't seem to be any propeller, or wheels, or anything to make her go."

Further remarks were barred by the approach of Krieg with orders to load the *Scorpion* at once with provisions, with the spools of coated rope, and with certain other

objects—some spherical, some cigar-shaped and of varying sizes, which he unearthed from a hidden cache.

It was a task, for everything had to be carried by hand and put exactly in the place prepared for it. For instance, the objects which were obviously bombs were loaded into chutes closely resembling torpedo tubes, while the spools of novalite rope were taken from their cylinders and carefully fitted upon perpendicular shafts, six upon each side of a slightly raised platform in what might be called the *Scorpion's* bows. When in position, each spool was a complete windlass in itself—or at least looked like one. And as each windlass was inclosed in a long, narrow box with a strip of glass in its front, the result was an arrangement unpleasantly suggestive of two rows of upright coffins. Liquid air was put in the coffins.

"To keep the stiffs from spoiling," Tommy remarked.

But there was little mirth in his tone.

The morning was long past and the afternoon nearly spent before all was done.

"*Yezt!*" cried Krieg at last, with a majestic wave of his hand.

It was as if he had shouted, "All aboard!"

"Keep together," Purdy cautioned his companions. "Take my word for it, there is considerably less danger inside now than out."

And now occurred an incident which was destined to linger long in his memory, not only because it gave a striking and unexpected point to his words, but because there came with it the first inkling of a new idea—the idea that Krieg, himself, was not without a baffling problem to contend with, something outside of and beyond him, disturbing his dreams and for which he could only watch and wait.

Krieg had been walking behind the others. A low exclamation from his lips caused everybody to turn. He stood staring up

into the branches of a tree. And there, almost directly above his head, extended at full length on an overhanging limb, was a dark-colored, cat-like beast, of the size of a half-grown tiger—yes, unquestionably a black jaguar come up from the jungles.

There was at first sight nothing especially remarkable in this, for jaguars may be found almost anywhere in South America where there are trees, though the boldness of the creature was beyond belief. Wildcats do not, as a rule, stalk human beings in broad daylight, to say nothing of stalking a party of five within a stone's throw of their habitation. But Krieg! The self-styled Kaiser of the World was actually trembling at the knees.

Purdy, who was carrying Krieg's revolver, let his glance travel slowly from man to beast, took careful aim at the crouching cat, and fired. He felt sure that he could not have missed.

The jaguar did not stir.

"One might see too much—a beast hiding in a tree and not afraid of bullets."

The words of the *peon* he had met upon the march came back with all their uncanny suggestion. But what was even more disturbing was Krieg's agitation now raised to fever heat. Whether it was due to fear or rage it was difficult to tell. But he raged, all but frothing at the mouth, shaking his fists, clearly beside himself with some ungovernable passion.

"*Teufel!*" he fairly screamed. "We stand loafing here, und—Devil! A thousand devils!"

Purdy felt relieved when all were at last within the *Scorpion's* cabin. Whatever they were going to meet, it was evident that they were at least leaving some curiously unhealthful things behind.

Krieg went forward to a sort of switchboard covered with levers and push-buttons. He touched something. It was like driving the plug out of the flue of a blast furnace.

There was a deafening roar, a sudden belch of fire. The outside world disappeared in a whirl of sparks and flame. The air seemed to wither in an intolerable breath of heat.

But it was only for a moment. And then everything—flames, tumult, and all—seemed to sink into the earth, leaving only normal daylight, and a thin, metallic shriek—a shriek whose violence was unlike anything which Purdy had ever heard in his life. It gave him the curious impression of something chasing after him at frantic speed but unable quite to keep up.

He approached a small disc of heavy glass that was set in the cabin floor, and looked down. Those discs, which from outside looked so much like eyes, were everywhere, and afforded a view in every direction. What he saw first was a whirlpool of fiery billows that appeared to be boring its way into the ground. Through it he caught occasional glimpses of white. But he could not understand why the noise, which must

still be terrific, should suddenly sound so feeble and far away.

Then the view cleared. There was utter silence save for that purring note which he had noticed on first approaching the *Scorpion's* side. The glimpses of white resolved themselves into a vast panorama of snow-capped mountain peaks—the *Cordillera Real*—like an ocean frozen in the midst of a storm, and lying beneath him at the distance of at least a mile. The wingless, propellerless *Scorpion* was flying.

Krieg touched another button. A spurt of flame shot out from beneath the car and became a writhing, twisting serpent of fire, but extending this time almost horizontally. The frozen sea became a rapidly flowing cataract, which seemed to pour *upward* out of some chasm farther ahead. Yet the waves which were mountain peaks receded to an ever greater distance. This contradiction between the real and apparent motion gave rise to a horrible dizziness. But Purdy

could not take away his eyes. The scene was terrific, yet beautiful beyond words.

It was clear now that the car moved on the principle of a skyrocket. Each spool of rope coated with its highly explosive novolite could be made slowly to unwind through a pipe reaching from its box to the mouth of a funnel beneath the *Scorpion's* head. Later Purdy discovered that there was a second funnel—above. At the windlass, the explosive was at the temperature of liquid air, far below zero. At the funnel it was fired by an electric spark, producing an endless series of explosions. Direction was determined by the angle of the funnel, which could be altered at will. Speed depended upon the rapidity with which the rope was paid out. Here was unlimited power under perfect control. No wonder it was so quiet. They were travelling faster than sound. Only those vibrations made by the funnel-mouth itself ever reached them. The rest were left behind.

As for the purring note, it proved to come from two enormous rollers set at right angles to each other and revolving rapidly in a framework suspended from the roof. Beneath the projecting end of each axle, and almost touching it, rose an upright post from the floor. When the car tipped, one of these posts came in contact with an axle. And then, in obedience to the tendency of all revolving bodies, be they tops or gyroscopes, to assume a position perpendicular to any supporting surface, the whole contrivance would gather its tons together and attempt to stand on its head, thus forcing the post back to where it belonged. So delicate were the adjustments that this incessant wobbling was confined within the limits of a quarter of an inch, and the floor continued apparently as level as a rock.

Beneath the gyroscope was an open grating through which a chill wind began to pour with an increasing violence which finally attracted Purdy's attention. The

power had been again shut off. The car was falling. He hurried forward to Krieg.

"What are you trying to do—commit murder and suicide all at once?"

Krieg turned half around, and laughed.

"You don't like it? Up we go."

The symphony of bursting atoms was resumed—and left behind. The view ahead, though already as wide as seemed well possible, began to spread yet farther in all directions, as if it had been a lordly cupful of batter suddenly dumped upon an infinite griddle. Purdy, forgetting all sense of danger, gave himself up to sheer childish wonder. He had made several trips in airplanes but had never experienced anything at all resembling the intoxicating sense of mastery which now swept through his veins. In an airplane one merely soared like a bird. In the *Scorpion* one seemed to control the heavens—a foolish illusion enough, unless one also controlled the *Scorpion*!

And all this time Tommy was left alone.

He had wandered to the rear of the car, and was standing by the opening through which they had entered. Two heavy steel plates, he saw, were ready to slide over it. But as yet it gaped with no safeguard save a railing—and that hardly higher than one's knee.

At first the newspaper man had been quite stunned by the sudden turn of events, by being hurled skyward when he expected only to plunge off through the forest. Gradually he had mastered himself, after a fashion; and realizing that he must not look at the abyss, had tried to fix his attention upon affairs within the cabin. He saw Krieg on his platform, gazing ahead and gesticulating wildly, like a madman on the bridge of a racing steamer. He saw Briggs, crouching unnoticed in a corner. He saw Purdy quietly examining the mechanism of the revolving rollers. And all the time he noticed Marie. He could not help noticing Marie. She was casting covert glances at

Purdy. And therein Tommy read love—love as plain as day. No matter what other mysteries there might be about her, the secret of her heart was out. Tommy had no doubt of it at all. And so, whether she eventually became the prey of Krieg (which God forbid!) or the prize of his friend, it was borne upon Tommy that never, never would she be his. He had utterly succumbed to Marie from the start, had taken her part through thick and thin, and learned to live upon the kindness with which she treated him. And now!

He permitted himself to look at the abyss with eyes which welcomed instead of trying to avoid its appalling depths. It was only a momentary weakness. In normal surroundings he would soon have fought such nonsense out of his head. But all at once the abyss seemed friendly. Its terrors died away. He sighed, like a man released from a long and intolerable anxiety.

Just then the view was cleared of the veil

of burning chemicals which had been hurtling across it, and the cry of the novalite leaped a full octave. The air lost substance, and Tommy had to swallow continually to relieve the inner pressure on his ear-drums. He shivered. Drowsiness invaded his senses.

Yet it was not the drowsiness which comes to men lost in storms and perishing from cold. It was rather a delicious insensibility from which he was afraid to awake. Afraid—that was it. For slowly an awful temptation was crawling into his mind. Unless he could lose consciousness altogether he would have to face and grapple with it. There lay the earth, becoming more and more like a far, unattainable paradise. He seemed to be tethered to it by a multitude of living wires. As he was dragged away, they tore him. The pain was intolerable. It would not let him drowse. He was lost.

The knowledge swept him suddenly, and brought him fully back to his senses. But

his body had acquired a volition of its own. Fiercely he battled against it. Was he not being torn loose from his tethers? Soon he would be free, if he could only hold out. Soon! But his body would not endure the torture—for it seemed to be his body that suffered. It would not obey him, not even to cry for help. Would nobody see, and save him?

That vertiginous emptiness without! It changed. It had become a monster now and flung itself upon him, throttled him, hung like a millstone about his neck. And when he finally did manage to give voice to a cry, it was too late. His legs had already hurled him into the void.

CHAPTER XV

THE ABYSS

PURDY, wheeling just in time to see what had happened, turned sick at heart as the body of his friend disappeared. Krieg gave a snort of impatience, and began moving about with the agility of a monkey. There was a touching of levers and buttons, a break in the sound of the funnel below the floor, followed by a terrific burst from the funnel set in the roof.

Their upward motion had ceased. Purdy felt it literally in his bones. He lost all apparent weight. His feet hardly seemed to touch the floor. Not only had rising ceased, but the car was falling with a rapidity that soon became appalling. In another second he was borne up against the ceiling, as though the power of gravity had been re-

versed. Most wonderful of all, the body of Tommy came into view beyond the opening, and appeared to be floating upward through space. The *Scorpion* was driving earthward faster than a body left to itself could fall.

Krieg shut off the upper funnel, and Tommy's apparent rising came to an end. He now rested, if the eye could be trusted, motionless just outside.

"*Schnell!* Drag him in!" shouted Krieg.

Purdy moved to obey, and became conscious, as he reached out toward his friend, that he might if he chose step bodily forth into emptiness without sinking below the level of the car. Drop as he might, it would drive at least as fast. During the instant it took this thought to rush through his mind, he caught Tommy by the arm. Fingers, clawlike and as cruel as those of a drowning man, sank into his flesh. He was locked fast. In case of the slightest hitch he would inevitably be jerked into destruction. Nevertheless, he was cool as he hauled

Tommy safely aboard. The world was too topsy-turvy for ordinary excitement.

The sense of weight asserted itself violently in the normal direction. The roar of the lower funnel, recently resumed, became absolutely deafening. And all was growing dark. Purdy looked back. The sun was just sinking with supernatural rapidity beneath the horizon. It had still been day in the heights. They had dived into evening. And below them stretched an unfamiliar country broken into ridges of low hills. Its surface was right at hand. All that dizzy intervening space had disappeared. Total destruction was a matter of yards, of seconds.

He felt the grasp of a hand. And the secret which Tommy had read in Marie's eyes became in that instant Purdy's own. No matter now what she had set out to do. No matter his own doubts and perplexities. In that moment of crisis doubts and perplexities were swept away. It was as if

two human souls had met, determined to crowd an eternity of understanding into the pitiful remnant of time that was left them. A surprising rush of happiness overwhelmed him. He had not known that he cared like this. Everything was over; but that was of no consequence. There was no opportunity even for regret. A single glance was the sum total of existence. Their lives would be blotted out before their lips could so much as meet in a kiss.

And yet—second after second passed. Purdy knew it by the beating of his heart. Nothing happened. The sense of weight became crushing. It bore them to the floor. But it was not the terrific crash which would mean the end. The car brushed the ground, but it did not strike. It bounded skyward again. They were saved.

But were they? Krieg had turned his back to his switchboard, and was regarding them with malignant fury. He had seen everything. There came a sound like the

slamming of heavy doors. The steel plates had been shot across the rear opening, and shutters closed the ventilating grate beneath the gyroscope. What was the gorilla man about to do?

Purdy turned to Tommy, who lay on the floor without any signs of life. Here was a duty which could not be neglected whatever threatened. Purdy had noticed while performing the rescue that the air felt thick to the touch, like a liquid. After all, the difference between liquids and gases—and solids, for that matter—lay only in the readiness of their particles to move aside before foreign bodies. And when the intrusion was sufficiently rapid the moving aside became relatively slow, even in a gas. Tommy had been literally drowned. Purdy began to apply the usual methods to restore arrested respiration.

"Where are you taking us?" he heard Marie inquire of Krieg.

"Straight up into *der Himmel*," came the

answer. "You like that—you and your lover?"

"Don't be foolish, Hans. He just happened to be near me, and I was frightened. I have no lover—only you."

How beautiful she looked! What infinite cajolery lurked in her eyes. Of course it was the wise thing to do, to coax this brute back into good humour. But Purdy felt a new and sudden alarm. One might lose one's life—that was but the ordinary chance, taken every day in a calling such as his. And also, it now appeared one might lose one's faith—a far more disturbing matter. He fought against the doubt which her words awakened. But could he ever forget again that she was, by her own saying, the monster's wife?

The wonder was that he had ceased to remember it. And now that he came to ponder over what had happened back there in the face of death, wasn't her present explanation a good one? Finding him near

she had grasped his hand—a reflex action, that was all. And the emotion which he had read in her eyes—passionate indignation, that was it. At the time he had taken it for something else, but passionate indignation quite described it. Had she been enraged to think that fate was about to destroy them at the very moment when their love stood confessed? Or wasn't it more likely that she had felt the bitterness of finding herself near him, him and not somebody else, and no time to move or to say a word?

In retrospect, his notion that she hated Krieg as much as he did seemed flimsy and founded on very little. He had never been able to fathom her motives. She was moved by a profound purpose—too profound to be accounted for by any data in sight. That was all he could be certain of, unless he admitted to himself the genuineness of her love for Krieg. And why shouldn't he? Women take strange whims.

He ought to be on his guard; doubly so, now that his heart had played him false. He must keep his head. He owed that to Briggs, who seemed utterly stupefied, and to Tommy, now slowly coming to his senses. True, he himself had the revolvers. But he could not be sure that he had them all. Even Marie might have another hidden about her person. And anyway, there was no bluffing Krieg. He too plainly held the fate of all in his hands—he with the thousand and one instruments of destruction that might be hidden among the devices controlled by his infernal levers and buttons.

Purdy stared up through one of the look-outs, hoping to rid himself for a moment of the vexations of the tangled human problem which confronted, and—yes, to avoid seeing Marie's smiles and the sullen irresponsiveness with which Krieg was meeting them.

The sky, to his surprise, had turned from blue to the utter blackness of space, and the stars had come out, enormous, bright,

crystalline, without a vestige of the ordinary friendly twinkle. And yet at this altitude it was not night. One could still see the sun. The sun? Was that the sun, that unfamiliar ball, too bright to be endured, which floated over the far horizon? It must be. But it shed no diffusive glory beyond its own sharp-cut disc; and it was tinged an appalling *blue*. So might look the sun of another system. There was, it appeared, an abyss above as well as below, and they had entered it.

Purdy's very soul filled with the loneliness of desolation. He turned his gaze downward, and felt his blood stand still. The earth did not seem to be so much beneath him as away, and it had taken on an unprecedented luminosity. What he saw was not daylight in the ordinary sense. No; the surface had commenced to shine. And it was beginning to be distinctly convex. The earth had become—a planet. Of course it always had been a planet, but there was

something hideous about the word now. It came to his mind with the force of a blow.

We all know that we live upon the exterior of a ball, but in our heart of hearts we do not believe it. Every work-a-day experience shows our habitat to be flat, and the theories of astronomers remain cold and meaningless abstractions, like the knowledge that all must die, which some instinct prevents us usually from applying to our own particular selves.

What was to hinder the *Scorpion* from going on and on till it reached the place where the tether of gravity would snap? It was not likely that the driving force of the novalite depended entirely upon the resistance of the air against which it impinged. Some of it must come from the inertia of its own atoms. It carried its fulcrum in itself, like a bombshell, which will explode and hurl its pieces even in a vacuum. The *Scorpion* was but the piece

of such a shell whose explosion never ceased. Its possibilities were frightful.

And yet—who has never felt a longing to cross the gulf which separates us from our celestial neighbours? Purdy, standing nearer to the stellar universe than his species had ever stood before, was seized by a reckless curiosity. What experiences might not be in store, what knowledge, before the inevitable end?

He was recalled to himself by a peculiar feeling of vertigo. Invisible hands were pressing him toward the cabin wall. What had happened? The power was now shut off. There was nothing to obstruct the view as he again looked down.

Surely they could not have drifted over the pole? And yet the earth, once more approaching and at a fearful rate, was clearly revolving about an apparent axis directly beneath them. Of course it was an illusion. Something had gone wrong. The car, not the earth, was spinning. That was it.

That long, perpendicular flight had given the novalite, which left the funnel with a certain twist, a chance to impart its own motion, and the air had grown too thin to offer any resistance. In other words, they had lost their steerage-way, and in a few minutes everybody on board would become as insensible as a stone.

CHAPTER XVI

PURDY DEALT WITH

MARIE was standing, her back pressed against the cabin wall. There was an exultant look in her eyes.

"You like it?" snarled Krieg, his whole fat body seeming to swell with venom as he turned to look at her.

"I have done my work," she murmured, dreamily, the rotation beginning to affect her. "Your power has killed itself. We shall die. And I die happy.

"Why not?" she finished with a laugh. "Am I not dying with you?"

"Die, then! *Auber*—I had forgotten!"

"The Jaguar! I had forgotten, too. We have one hatred in common. Let us live."

Purdy comprehended dimly that some

mysterious passage at arms had taken place, and that Marie, after a momentary advantage, had lost. As the funnel began speaking again, arresting the *Scorpion's* antics and sending it once more forward, her face grew haggard—almost old. She had resumed, one could guess, some intolerable burden. Another thing was certain: that dizzy whirl had been no accident. Krieg had never lost control of his machinery. And Marie had mentioned—the jungle beast!

The cabin began to glow with electric lights. It had long since been evident that there were arrangements for maintaining an equable temperature and an adequate supply of oxygen regardless of altitude. With liquid air and an electric plant—no doubt with a storage battery—on board, the means employed were easily surmised. And now, with all openings to the outer world still closed, the interior was positively cheerful. A hinged panel lowered itself from one

side of the frame of the gyroscope, forming a table. A long, upholstered seat, or divan, ran already along the wall at a convenient distance. It was like a Paris café.

"We haf hunger," said Krieg, grinning in Marie's direction. Either he had discovered a new reason for satisfaction, or had determined on a change of tactics.

Purdy lifted Tommy to a place on the divan. Marie set out provisions.

Everybody *was* hungry, and even Krieg grew in a measure human as the uniquely circumstanced meal progressed. He explained how he had attached parachutes to some of his bombs for producing those weird aërial effects which had been so startling when seen from below. A parachute, an improved sort of Greek fire, and a high explosive to spread it horizontally—the combination was quite enough to cover the visible heavens with a shimmering umbrella of flame. Substitute smoke-power for Greek fire, and one had a contrivance which could

blot out the flames as with a spreading of the fiend's wings. It was all very simple.

He answered a question, too, in regard to the Los Altos railroad.

"Some foolish official people make me build der extension to help me ship subblies to my foundry—as if I would make one sign-post for the first Yankee along to see! Official people like the ostriches behave. They think nobody see something because they put their own heads in der sand. So I lay their rails in one liddle wrong direction, and for myself make a road, too good—but the rails lead all spies astray. Maybe der officials foresee what I would do, and not so stupid. *Ich weis nicht.*"

The *Scorpion* had sometimes plowed along the broader trails. That explained the natives' avoidance of open lanes. But Krieg denied any knowledge of how Purdy's llama met its death. The circumstance, when related, seemed to cause him uneasiness. He cursed under his breath and looked at Marie.

Purdy studied the switchboard. If he could but learn to run the car——

But Krieg, when the dinner was over, seemed bent on bewildering him with a display of its complications. He was showing off, perhaps. At one moment the electrics would be blazing, and the car to all appearances at rest. Then the lamps would fade, and after a mad plunge earthward, unbelievable sunlight would pour through the circular windows. A few minutes later it would be night again, with the unknown interior of a continent lost in the shadows below.

"Tommy," whispered Purdy, after one of these miracles. "The way I reckon it, we are travelling faster than the earth rotates—that is, more than a thousand miles an hour. Krieg has produced something new, after all. We might call it—speed. Or, for practical purposes, you might call it—omnipotence."

"Look after Marie," said Tommy, weakly.

The unlucky journalist was right. Helpless as he was, body and brain both to all intents and purposes useless from the shock he had undergone, he had stumbled upon the crux of the situation. The mechanics of Krieg's discovery did not matter. It was his purpose—his immediate purpose, whatever it might be beneath this new pretence of affability—which must be fathomed and dealt with.

It was becoming plainer and plainer that he was not travelling at random. No, he was searching for something. Hour after hour the *Scorpion* darted hither and thither, frequently at such a low elevation that the glare of its funnel cast a disc of brightness on the ground in the manner of a searchlight. At times the fantastic artillery of its equipment would be turned loose. Smoke-bombs and fire-bombs fell, or exploded in mid-air, producing phenomena likely to attract the attention of half a world. But all the time Krieg peered anxiously forth, sometimes at

the zenith, sometimes toward the horizon. Marie was watchful, too. She favoured this enterprise, whatever it was. Seated on a distant corner of the divan, she scarce lifted her glance from the transparent disc at her feet. But if it did chance for an instant to wander to Krieg, its loathing was undisguised. Since her openly expressed preference for death she seemed less mistress of herself. Or was it that it was useless now to resume the mask?

Thus far, there had been no show of real destructive power. Could it be possible that, apart from the devastating outpour of its funnel, the *Scorpion* had no sting? But already a change was coming over Krieg's demeanour. His persuasive efforts had failed. His childish fireworks had awakened no signs of admiration in anybody. And Marie was like an image of stone. Perhaps this piqued his ire. Perhaps the non-success of his search had become too much for his patience. But

whatever the reason, his face darkened, becoming ferocious, frightful.

The car was flying very low and at a lazy snail's pace, casting but a faint illumination upon objects beneath it. They appeared to be crossing a forest. Then came open fields, and the distinct outlines of a village. So far as size and appearance went, it might have been Los Altos. But its streets were filling with a shouting and gesticulating throng, aroused from sleep by the apparition above them.

Instantly Krieg brightened and began to dance about on his platform. He gave the impression of one who has found a forgotten trump card up his sleeve and now means to play it. Defy him, would they, by their insolent aloofness, these men whom he had deigned to make his companions, this woman who confessed to bearing his name? Very well; let them watch. He would give them a sample of what he could do. After that, perhaps they would be glad of his favour.

And if they did not yield their homage willingly, there would remain yet other ways of compelling it.

Something like this could be read in his face as he circled slowly. Every moment the crowd and the excitement below increased. Krieg shut off the power, and swept down like a hawk. He pulled a lever. And into that helpless cluster of huts, into that host of upturned faces, something dropped. This time there was no smoke, only a blinding flash, which wiped the village off the earth as a sponge wipes a picture from a slate.

Marie, with a low moan, sank to the floor and began to drag her rebellious body toward the author of this new horror. The car, beat upon by the waves of the explosion, bounded like a light rubber ball into the desecrated heavens, and the cacophony of its own motive power resumed its sway—a sobbing shriek which seemed but to echo the shrieks of agonized men and the sobs

of mutilated women and children. But Marie persisted in her act of abnegation.

"Hans! Hans!" she choked. "No more of this. Do what you will with me. I—I was wrong. I submit."

It was Krieg's own terrible hour. Ignoring the suppliant, he shouted and waved his arms.

"Der earth iss mine und der fullness thereof!" he chanted.

Then he turned and threw a piece of rope in Purdy's direction.

"Tie up that liddle beast—hand and foot," he ordered, pointing to Tommy.

Purdy, playing for time, pretended to obey.

"Now take him; and throw him out!"

The opening clanged wide. The cool night air crept in. Purdy did not stir.

"Oh, enough!" cried Marie. "Don't punish me any more. I can't bear it. These killings! God! Is there nothing else in the world? Don't I belong to you, Hans? Aren't you satisfied?"

"You say it? You belong to me? Then prove it. Weisner must be dead, I think. Maybe my traps catch *big* jaguar. We are alone. I don't count these pig. Come here! Come here to me—*yetz!*"

His features were distorted with passion. His eyes seemed to devour the girl crouching before him. The thick lips worked convulsively. He held out his arms.

She flushed red, then grew perfectly white. With a shudder she drew back.

"You make fool of me again!" Krieg shouted, bending down and dragging her to her feet. "I vill teach you!"

His fat fingers fastened themselves in the neck of her blouse and tore it away.

Purdy had been looking on, stupefied with horror. But now, as the brute in front of him half turned his back, he came to himself. Here was opportunity. Let what might happen to the car. Better face any consequences than let this scene endure a moment longer. He reached for his re-

volver. Krieg had left him two, relying no doubt upon the safety which hedges a captain, when no one else knows how to run the ship. Well, let him find out his mistake. Earth could no longer endure such a monster.

What Purdy had not counted on was a tiny mirror set in the switchboard. Krieg saw his danger just in time, jerked the long handle of a lever out of its socket, and struck down Purdy's arm.

The revolver clattered to the floor, and the men grappled. The combat, it appeared, was to be settled by jungle law. So be it. Purdy felt his hand come in contact with a throat into which his fingers sank with a strangely delicious thrill. His enemy grossly over-matched him in weight, but weight must yield in time before the lithe strength which comes from a life lived hard and clean. It was no grassy slope that they fought on now. The odds were fair.

And after all, it was only a wrestling-match. The weapon which Krieg still clutched was a toy. Purdy had caught hold of it, and it was worth as much to him as to the other. True, he possessed but little science of the sort now needed most, and his position exposed him to the blows of his enemy's left fist. But the blows were growing weaker every second, and to a certain extent he could block them with his arm. Krieg seemed about to collapse, and permitted himself to be thrust back against the switchboard.

That thrust back was a mistake. This was Purdy's last coherent thought. For Krieg's free hand had dived into a cunningly hidden receptacle. There was the sound of a shot. But Purdy did not feel the bullet which struck his forehead. All the darkness of all the nights in the world overwhelmed him.

CHAPTER XVII

TRIEG'S LEGACY

PURDY was aware that his physical senses had been awake for an indefinite period. He had been hearing, seeing, feeling—but comprehending nothing. For instance, that electric light bulb. His eyes had been resting upon it for a long time. He knew this because he had found them already open and looking at it. And he half remembered—what was it?—a sobbing beside him; his face being bathed with something cool and refreshing; two darkly shining eyes, streaming with tears. Or had he dreamed it all? Where was he? What had happened? How long had he been lying thus, flat on his back on a bed as hard as a plank? His pillow was soft enough, but that did not account for the hardness of the bed.

Scattered bits of recollection returned. For some reason or other he had fought with Krieg, and that dull pain in his head was where Krieg's bullet had struck. He remembered now having caught one flashing glimpse of the levelled muzzle. The bullet must have stunned him, glancing along the bone. Now the wound had been bandaged—he could feel it. A very good job, too. As for the hard bed, it was nothing but the floor of the *Scorpion*.

He started, for the pillow had suddenly stirred beneath him. Why, it was Marie's arm. And a voice was saying:

"Quick, dear! Can you run the car?"

It sounded like Marie's voice. But of course his mind was wandering. He had merely slipped from one dream into another. Marie was his enemy, as nearly as he could recall. At least there was something strange about her which prevented an understanding. This idea of her calling him "dear" was a pleasant delusion. He

wished it would last. Perhaps she had merely said:

"Quick! Here, can you run the car?"

It would have sounded about the same.

But running the car—that was Krieg's business. It was absurd to think that Krieg would let him run the car. He shook his head at the very notion. Then his eyelids grew heavy and closed of themselves.

"It is useless," said the voice. "There! I'll let you sleep. Perhaps it's all the better. How *could* I want to wake you?"

He slipped away into another world.

"I want to wake you."

Those were the words he carried with him. Wanted to wake him, did they? Of course. He was a ' He had spent the night at his aunt's. he did not like his aunt. She doted on him, and was always laying down terrible rules of conduct for his good. Waking up at unearthly hours of the morning was a hobby of hers. In another minute she would be kissing him. It was the

way she always woke him up—as if *that* were a sugar-coating for the pill. Yes, something soft and warm certainly brushed his lips.

He frowned, lifting himself suddenly on his elbow.

“Why can’t you——”

He stopped. He was awake. And after all it *was* Marie crouching there beside him. A soft feeling of elation stole into his heart. Never talk to him about instinct or intuition again. Why, it must have been Marie——

But no. This was a very different Marie from the one he had been dreaming of a minute ago—the one who had said “dear.” There was not so much as a sign of welcome upon her painfully flushed face. One might almost say that she was sorry to see him coming back to life. A woman surprised when she was about to administer a dose of poison might look like that. And now she rose hastily and walked to the other side of the car.

He glanced around. Unless his eyes deceived him, Tommy was lying in a corner, tied up like a package of merchandise. But Briggs? Krieg? No sign of either of them. They were gone. It was ridiculous to suppose that any one could have left the car. And yet, gone they were. Was the car on the ground, then? No; the roar of the funnel was unmistakable. The earth was far off—very, very far, to judge by the difficulty of breathing and the chill which pervaded everything.

"But if we landed, how did we come up again, without——"

"We didn't land," interrupted the girl, speaking over her shoulder.

"But Krieg?"

"Briggs threw him out. They both fell out together."

It was Tommy who spoke, and the tone was rasping, impatient, utterly unlike Tommy's. But it brought back the whole situation: the terrible danger which had threat-

ened Marie. And he, Purdy, had failed in her defence, had fallen helpless at the critical moment. What had taken place? Was *that* what ailed the girl?

"*When* did he throw him out?" Desperately he tried to keep his anxiety out of his voice, for he felt that if he did not keep tight hold of himself now he would go to pieces again.

"It was in time," Marie answered for herself. "Nothing happened to me, if that is what you mean."

But she spoke indifferently, and Tommy was beckoning with an almost imperceptible motion of his head. It was truly strange that Tommy should be in bonds.

"How in the world did you get into such a fix as this?" asked Purdy, struggling to his feet and going toward him. How frightfully his head ached when he moved. It was almost impossible to think. The effort of getting out a knife to cut his friend free almost made him numb.

"Krieg tied me up right after shooting at you," said Tommy. "He didn't want to take any more chances with us, I guess.

"And she," he added in a whisper, indicating Marie who was looking off into the distance, "she hasn't had any time to loosen me. There was no possibility of *my* knowing how to run the car. She's been working over you. But listen. There's something I want to tell you."

Purdy stooped lower to catch the words, and cut the last of the fetters. Tommy went on:

"I love her. I don't care who or what she is. But I've got to tell you something. Krieg went crazy, I think. After laying you out he began dropping bombs. He let loose everything in the shop. It looked as if the whole world would be blown to pieces. Briggs threw himself on him while he was doing that—got hold of him and held his arms down and dragged him out. He

may have been a hunchback, but he fought like a bear.

"And in the midst of it," Tommy choked; "in the midst of it, with me lying here not able to stir, Marie tried to help Krieg, and nearly went out with him trying to save him. No, she didn't want *him* to die. God! I wish I hadn't lived to see it."

"All right," said Purdy, speaking aloud and hiding his feelings with an ability which surprised him. "I'll see what I can do with the machinery. Where are we? A good way up by the way it feels."

"Yes; we've been gradually getting higher for a long time. But I've no idea where we are—and I didn't know how to shut the door."

It was Marie who had come forward, and in her hands was a glass.

"Here, drink this. It will make you feel better."

He drank what proved to be brandy, and did feel better immediately. Tommy—

what had Tommy been saying? Oh, something monstrous! His brain reeled again as he realized that it had really been said—was not a part of some horrible nightmare. Marie's supposed antagonism to Krieg must have been mere pretence, then. Yes, it was monstrous. He staggered as he made for the switchboard, unable to look her in the face.

"Wait!" she admonished him. "Don't touch anything yet. There is something I want to tell you."

Tommy's exact words! Purdy waited. What would he be hearing next?

"Just at the last minute, when he was begging Briggs to let go, Krieg made a threat. He said that if he died we'd find that he'd left something behind for us to remember him by. What if he has fixed the machinery so that it can't be run? He knew you had been watching him. He might have prepared, in case he was attacked again—why, it might explode, or anything!"

Their common peril was drawing them together. Her voice was more natural. She had come near and was looking over his shoulder. Confound it, it was impossible to distrust her! He knew very well that if she had fought on the side of Krieg it was not merely to save the *Scorpion's* one competent engineer. Another woman might very well have hesitated to trust herself in a flying monster of steel without the man who knew how to keep it flying—yes, and have tried to save him though he were the devil himself. But Marie must have had a deeper reason. She was not frightened even now. The anxiety of a lieutenant on the eve of a desperate charge is not personal fear. Very well. Might she not have had a *better* reason, then?

Comforted in spite of himself by a renewed sense of companionship, Purdy touched an electric button—and the cabin lights went out. The mistake was soon rectified. Another button, and the car's

rear opening closed. Yet another, and artificial heating and air-supply was re-established, as was soon evident by increased comfort. Matters were progressing famously. And then, while he hesitated as to what to do next, a shudder-like tremor passed through the very foundations of the car. It did not exactly lurch, but the old sense of stability was alarmingly gone.

"What was that?" asked Marie, still at his side.

"I don't know. I thought we struck something—but of course that's impossible."

He shut off the power—by a lever he had seen Krieg use. It became very quiet. Too quiet. An element was missing from what they had grown accustomed to regard as silence.

"I know!" cried Purdy. "The current has been disconnected from the gyroscope. It's running down."

As he spoke, the *Scorpion* lunged sharply

forward, then turned completely over and began to roll and plunge like a bird that has been wounded in full wing and falls helplessly to its death. The confusion on board was indescribable.

But Purdy clung desperately to his levers. The switchboard was as if alive. It flung him this way and that. One instant he would be thrown violently against it; the next it would try to escape from him altogether. Now it would be right side up; now upside down. But always he clung to what was before him. Sometimes it was by only one hand—but he clung, manipulating one thing after another as it came within reach, determined to find the right bit of mechanism to bring order out of chaos. Once the power came on at one of the funnels and made matters only the worse. But finally, in a fortunate moment, just as his strength was about exhausted, he moved the proper switch. The gyroscope, taking up its note, gradually brought the car to a

level. He wiped a trickle of blood from his face, and looked around.

The others had come through the terrific shake-up better than could have been expected. Tommy had indeed suffered many bruises, but declared himself alive and without serious injury. Marie had found a post to hold fast to, and was practically unscathed. Her eyes were shining.

"That was splendid—what you did then," she said. "You'll save us yet."

"Yes, I think so," he assented with a shade of doubt.

He had discovered something—was beginning to understand what sort of a legacy Krieg had really taken pains to leave behind him. It was something more than a disconnected gyroscope.

CHAPTER XVIII

WEISNER

THOUGH the car had lost a great deal of its former altitude, it was moving quite at his will now above an endless expanse of white, broken clouds, lighted by a low western moon. It was fairyland. But he had been looking at the inclosed windlasses—that row of upright, glass-lidded coffins on either side of the switch-board. In one a spool of novalite turned slowly. The others were empty. There was an arrangemnet, he saw, which permitted the spools to be dropped in lieu of bombs through a chute in the floor. Krieg had thrown overboard the extra supply of power. Only that single spool was left. Would it be enough to take them safely down?

Purdy watched it unwind. Altitude was being maintained, and the windlass scarcely moved. The barometer showed two and a half miles. Yes, as he roughly calculated it, there was enough, if one did not put off descending too long—and nothing happened.

What could happen? They were alone in the universe. No rocks or shoals in this supernal sea. But it might be well to descend below the clouds and find out what sort of a country awaited them. No use landing in the midst of a wilderness if it could be helped. And—it could not be denied—an unreasoning terror possessed him. Everything seemed right. Yet everything was somehow wrong. And he longed as never before to be out of it all and back to solid earth.

Marie was standing to one side, looking out. She had forgotten to rearrange her hair, and it streamed, long and dark, in disarray down her back. An unwonted tenseness in her attitude attracted his attention.

He followed her gaze. Far off toward the horizon was a fan-shaped flame.

"It must be our shadow!" Purdy exclaimed. And then, as a sight of their real shadow—a vague penumbra outlined by the moon upon the clouds—made him realize the absurdity of his words:

"*Reflection*, I meant to say. Watch!"

He steered toward the phantom: it receded. And when he retreated the phantom followed.

"Yes, it's a reflection—something like a mirage. I've seen them in the desert. Must be a denser current of air somewhere. Acts like a mirror. I wonder how high it extends."

The *Scorpion* had practically ceased to move. But the phantom—was it not larger than at first? Certainly; much larger. And it was coming nearer with a rapidity which seemed miraculous. This was no ghost, no mere optical illusion. And the *Scorpion's* hesitation seemed to have given it courage.

"It's another car—like ours," said Purdy, stupefied.

Marie pronounced a single word:

"Weisner!"

Purdy groaned. Weisner had been Krieg's partner, then; a second string to his bow. Or else——

The thing came on and flew past overhead. A dark object fell, just missing the *Scorpion's* back. A bomb! No; Weisner had not been Krieg's partner. There had been two cars. The troubled lake by the *casa* should have told them that. Weisner had stolen one of them; meant now to make it the only one. He was an enemy. That was the secret.

Purdy drove forward at high speed. The rival gave chase, but failed to keep up. No doubt it was an earlier and inferior model. Purdy breathed easier, and began to descend.

Marie rushed toward him.

"We are not running away?"

"Yes."

"No, no! We must fight. Can't you see—don't you understand what it would mean to leave a secret, a power like this alive in the world?"

"I see quite well. But it can't be helped. Krieg—I didn't mean to tell you—but he dropped all the extra spools. We've hardly enough novalite left to make our landing, let alone staying through a fight."

"Oh!" She laid her hand on his shoulder. Then:

"Are you afraid to die, my friend?"

"I hope not. But you——"

"This is no time to think of me. Turn back! If you only knew my history, my people, what it means to me! Not death—that is nothing. But to leave this monstrous——"

"Have you no idea what I have endured, trying to help capture that creature out there? I could have dealt with Krieg a thousand times. But what was the use,

so long as Weisner was left? And now you talk of saving me!"

"That's right," cut in the unexpected voice of Tommy. "We've been as blind as bats. Turn back as she says. Let's give it to the beggars."

Purdy swung the *Scorpion* about. Yes; they had been as blind as bats. He saw it now.

The cars charged directly toward each other, two great bulls of steel brought into being by the perverted genius of man. But instead of locking horns, Weisner at the critical instant swerved aside. Nothing happened save a sharp rasp as the circumferences grazed and passed. What game was this?

Again they wheeled and faced, and again a sudden turn prevented a head-end collision. But this time there was a heavy jar. Purdy began to understand. The other car, if slower, was larger and heavier. If it could be made to strike—not too hard, but just

hard enough, Weisner might win a victory without cost. Purdy must see to it that the next encounter meant death to all concerned. He was ready for anything now.

The enemy seemed to read his mind, for he circled wide, darted upward, and let fall another bomb. Then began a race for the zenith, which Purdy won—by a reckless use of power.

The night was now dark, or so appeared in contrast with the belching fire of the monsters that fought across it. The clouds had thinned. Blackness covered the abyss as with a treacherous carpet. Only the air, so rarefied that the shrieking funnels sounded like the voices of toy whistles, told of the awful height that had been reached. There was no more time to lose. The enemy, at the distance of some quarter of a mile, seemed to be waiting. Had he noticed something unskilful in the *Scorpion's* handling? Full speed after him, then, be-

fore he could take any further advantage of it. Even a stern chase ought to result in mutual wreck—if only the nevalite held out.

Purdy's hand was already on the proper lever, ready to shove it to its uttermost notch.

But what ailed Weisner? He was approaching slowly, unsteadily. A window opened in his car. A bearded face appeared. Purdy slid back a circular pane and caught the words:

"—will surrender. Help us! For God's sake!"

"He's short of power, too," breathed Purdy. "He thinks——"

But the flame from Weisner's funnel began to pale. His car lost altitude. Suddenly the funnel went black. And gravity, impatient of its long wait, reached out invisible arms. There came a cry which was not of bursting molecules—a cry, weak but vitally human. Purdy, using his funnel

as a search-light, kept track for a few seconds of a thing of metal which shot to the very bottom of the gulf of darkness. The *Scorpion* and its crew held undisputed sway in the sky.

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CHAPTER XIX

A LOST DISCOVERY

IF ONLY there were some way to bridge the miles between them and safety!

Purdy put aside the thought, set the machinery so that the end might be delayed as long as possible, and went over to Marie. In his heart was a measure of contrition. How his foolish brain had fought against her.

"I was so afraid!" she whispered. "But—I'm not, now."

Here was just a simple woman, clinging to him for strength and comfort. And he was the one in all the world that she wanted to cling to. Her face, her sign of returning courage, told him that. The thousand questions, as yet unanswered, seemed of very little consequence now.

"Were you really that creature's wife?" was all that he asked.

"Only in name," she replied, simply. "We were married the day he left the capital two years ago. I had to—to keep his confidence."

"That was too much for even a Secret Service to ask of you."

"I do not belong to any Secret Service. I really didn't have your password." And her eyes took on a look of indescribable sadness as she added:

"I am not an American by birth; only by adoption. I am a Serbian."

"Then you were working for——"

"My country! I went back home at the beginning of the war. You do not know what Bulgaria—and another nation that I cannot bear even to name—has done to my people, to my family, to my own brothers and sisters. Yes, and after I went back, to me. You will never know. I had sworn to avenge these wrongs. I was captured.

I escaped. Then I learned of this Krieg, of how he had stolen a wonderful mechanical secret, and was developing and perverting it. He murdered the original inventor, an American, and not a Frenchman as he told you. And he made of it a new machine to kill. Kill! Kill! It was always that. The old reign of brutality was to be renewed, it seemed, just when everybody thought it was passing away forever. I was determined that it should not. So I married him. I would have been willing at that time even to have——”

“But why didn’t you tell me?”

A noiseless laugh parted the woman’s lips, full of mischief and real amusement.

“Men are such wretched actors! I had to prevent a perfect understanding between us. He would have seen it. Besides, nothing but your own heart would have believed me—without that wretched password. And I was afraid if I let you care too much, that you might have to see—what you couldn’t bear.”

"But after he was disposed of? After I had said——"

"You said nothing, dear. And I am a woman. I must hear the words. Why, you even woke up scowling after Krieg shot you, and I had just ——"

"I thought it was an old aunt of mine. I was dreaming of her."

Their laughter rang out, as if this was all taking place in some comfortable nook of earth, and not in the pitiless heavens where the *Scorpion* was slowly creeping to the edge of doom.

"You certainly can act, if I cannot," Purdy continued. "That is, if you——"

"I did! I did almost from the first. And it interfered dreadfully with my plans. Krieg became an impossibility after that. Oh, if I have had caprices, you must forgive me."

"Speaking of forgiveness," put in Tommy from across the car, "I've been a miserable cur. I told Purdy——"

"I know, Tommy. I heard part of it—about my trying to interfere with poor old Briggs. You only did your duty. Krieg to me then was just Weisner's enemy. But how could you know?"

"I suppose," said Purdy, "that it was Weisner who shot my llama with an airgun, or something."

"Probably. He was always sneaking around. It seemed to delight him to drive Krieg frantic. From the day he stole the *Jaguar*——"

"The *Jaguar*?" cried Purdy and Tommy together.

"Yes, that was the name of the other machine. They used to fly with it away off the jungle and camouflage it there under a sheet of painted canvas. It really looked then something like its name, Krieg said, except for size. But Weisner was a clever mechanic, and after working for a while as assistant he got the whole secret. But he wanted to kill Krieg before attempting any-

thing big. He used to shoot real jaguars, and put them in the trees around the workshop. You saw one. It made Krieg reckless. He would sometimes spend hours in the woods, hoping to catch him at it. That was what Weisner wanted. But somehow they never met."

The girl fell silent. The funnel had fallen silent, too. A low whine, the breath of their descent, gradually growing to a hurricane, came in through the *Scorpion's* armour.

"Good-bye, you two," said Tommy in a cheerful voice, and turned his face to the wall.

"Good-bye!"

There seemed nothing left to say. Marie kissed Purdy once upon the lips, and closed her eyes. There is something lonely, after all, in death.

Purdy stared off into space with level, unseeing eyes.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet. A scene of unutterable beauty lay beneath—some-

thing near and familiar. They had moved, in spite of their windings, in one vast circle, and were back again near to the starting-point. Surely that landscape—in places a desert but serenely pastoral along the streams, with its cattle, its *haciendas* and their peacefully smoking chimneys—was the country about Lara's capital city. And that line of rocks, gleaming like teeth, was the coast.

Purdy, however, gave it but a single glance. He was working frantically about the windlass. The novalite passed to the funnel through a pipe. When the last end of it left the windlass there would remain, he had just happened to think, several feet of it still in the pipe. If he had, now, something by means of which he could move it on!

The long, slender, lever-handle with which Krieg had once disarmed him! He caught it up, smashed the glass of the coffin-like box, tore loose the end of the explosive strand

from the spool, inserted the lever-handle in the upper orifice of the pipe, and urged the contents downward. There was little room to work in, but the lever-handle was fortunately short. If the rope with its core of wire would but permit itself to be shoved! So terrific was its power that a few inches might be sufficient.

The experiment promised success. An explosive burst sounded from the funnel below. The *Scorpion* began to struggle, It hesitated; stood still; drifted past the rocks; began once more to sink. Beneath lay a lonely beach, a land-locked bay. It was not so very far to fall. Purdy opened the sliding doors.

"Jump—the instant before we strike the water!" he shouted. "Jump clear. There is a fighting chance."

He seized Marie by the hand, and they took the chance together.

Some days later, at a table in the best

café in that shabby little South American city which must still be nameless, sat a sun-browned Yankee. From the ceiling a number of creaking, rotary fans, patterned after Don Quixote's windmills, drove down the hot breath of the Tropic of Capricorn.

"Tommy," he said, "Krieg and Weisner are—where they belong. Their machines are destroyed. Their secret ought to be destroyed, too. We must go back to that machine-shop in the hills and blow it up with what is left of the novalite. There might be blueprints, plans of some sort. I don't want a scrap of paper to escape."

Marie, who made the third of the party, clapped her hands softly in applause of Purdy's speech.

"All right," said Tommy. "Only let me get a couple of guides and go alone. I—I need the trip."

This being agreed to, Tommy rose and left the café.

"Poor chap!" said Purdy, after a pause.

"But I suppose we've got to forget him, and be happy."

"We can't help being happy," said Marie, as a hand reached hers across the table.

"And think! In all the future no nation will ever enslave another again, no nation will ever become too strong."

"At least, let us hope," assented Purdy.

THE END



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